THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Sword OF TOMORROW

A Novel of the Future

By HENRY KUTTNER

COSMIC CARAVAN

An Interplanetary Novelet By ED WESTON

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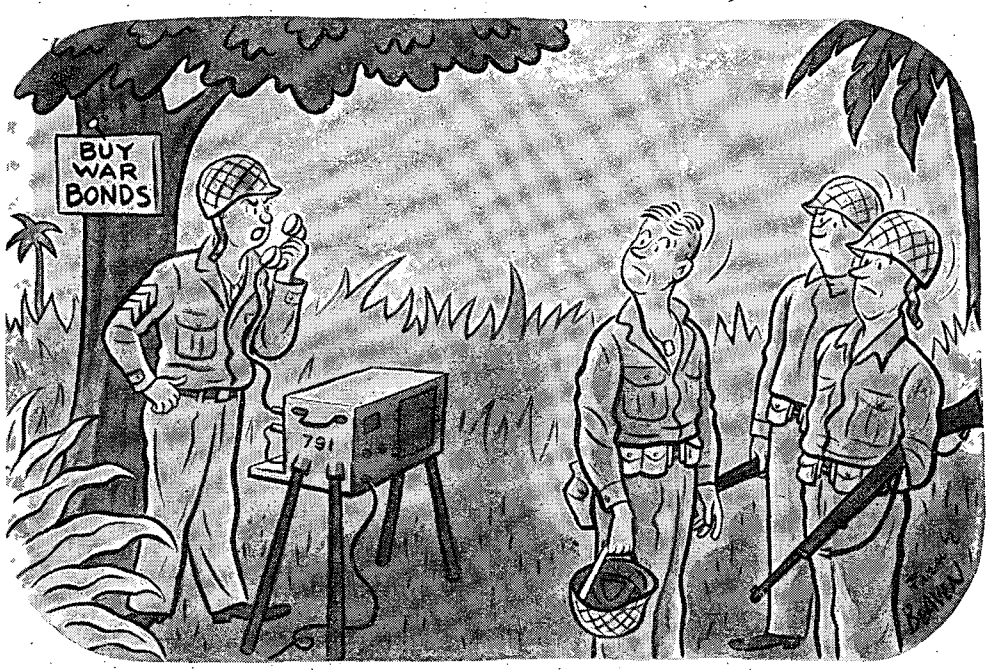

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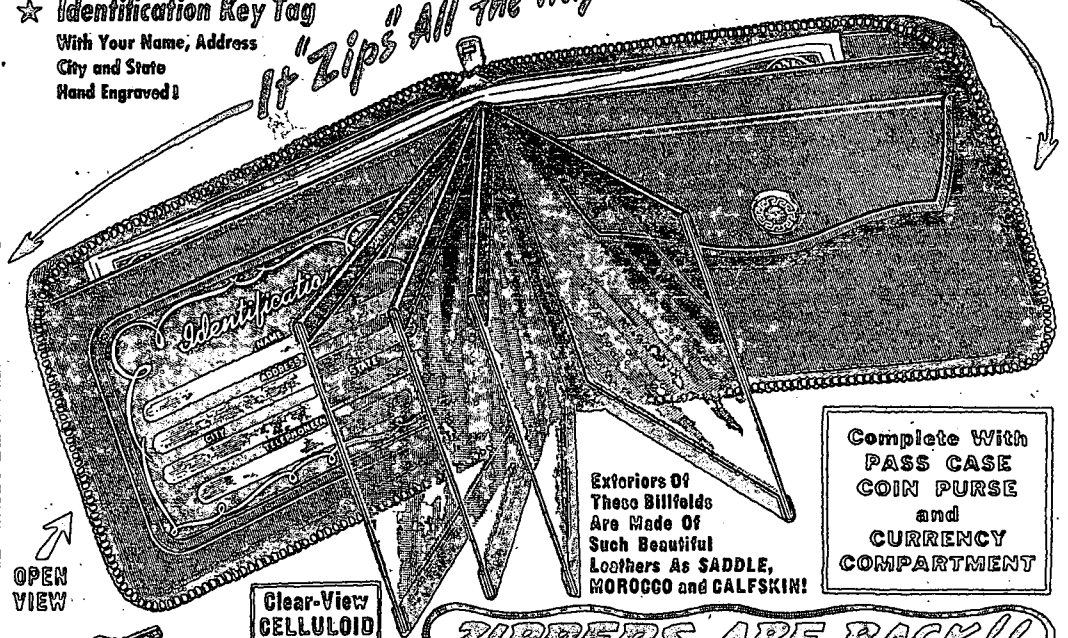

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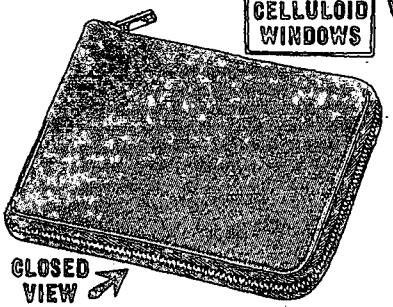

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The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

Vol. XXVII, No. 3
Fall, 1945

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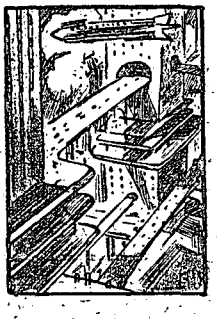

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Trance-borne to a far distant age, Pilot Ethan Court is plunged into peril and adventure on a strange new world where his courage and idealism are put to a stern test! 11

Two Complete Novelets

SPACE TRAP ..... Polton Cross 40
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ON THE COVER: Painting by Earle Bergey depicts a scene in Ed Weston's complete novelet, COSMIC CARAVAN.

Published quarterly by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President.

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Subscription (12 issues) $1.80, single copies, 15c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second-class matter May 21, 1936, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

November, 1945, issue

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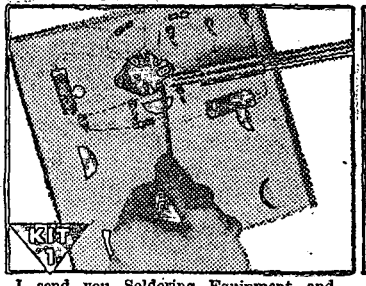

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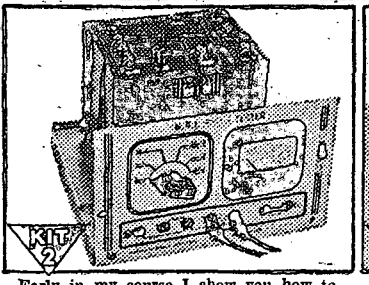
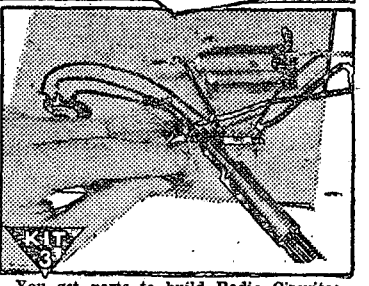
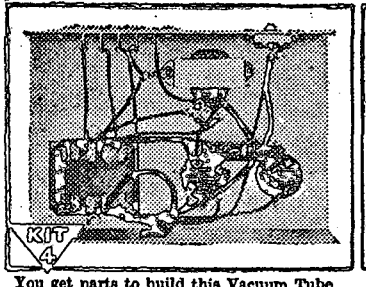


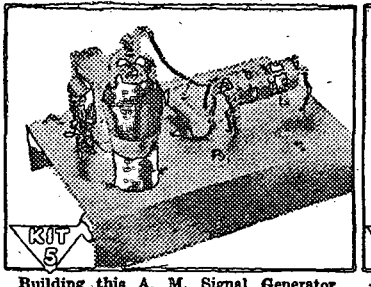
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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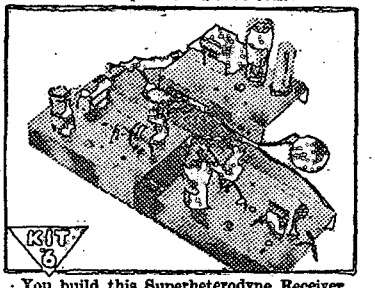

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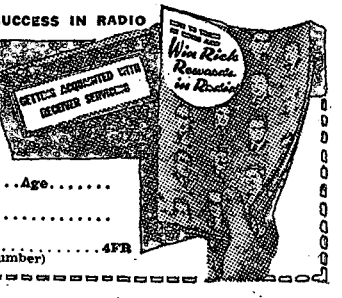

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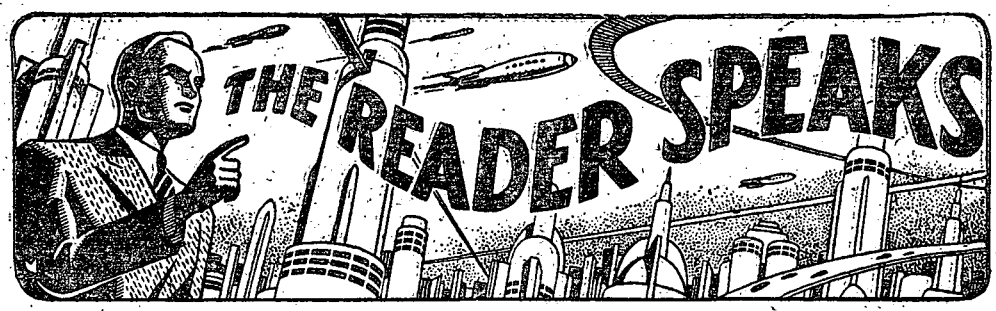

A Department Conducted by SERGEANT SATURN

BRING out the beautifying mirror, Snaggletooth—and the Xeno juice. Let's see if I'm still any use!

Uuugghh! Dark worlds and meteor showers! It's warm this season of the year on the sunny side of Venus when the fog removers are at work. So tell me, Frogeyes, why is my tongue wearing this heavy coat?

Ah, well, slack and Mercurian hop-skip-and-jumptoads! When mere earthlings dare to defy the Sarge, anything can happen, even lingual overcoats in a Venusian July. Next week, Wart-ears, the Galactic council will probably outlaw Xeno—but no, that would be the end.

Ah, Xeno. Thank you, Snaggie old tooth. At times you have your uses. The Sarge feels better able to face this blast from earth. One, M. Katerman of Reading, Pennsylvania—outlandish name for a place, what, Snaggie?—has defied the Sarge in the following caterwaul. Caterwaul from Katerman—not bad for an old space toddler—and don't throw any more Venusian crocodile tears at me, Frogeyes. The Sarge can't help half punning. But here is the dire missive that has reduced us to such pitiful condition:

Dear Sarge: I read your article in THE READER SPEAKS and was greatly disappointed and shocked that you, above all people, should denounce Mr. Farnsworth and his rocket-to-the-moon ideas as wild. Frankly I don't think they are. I am looking forward to the day when science fiction will become science fact. So would any real thinking person who has his eye on the future. But, tragic though true, anything for the development of mankind was always condemned.

People in general are too narrow-minded, intolerant and downright stupid to grasp the real importance of any new endeavor. If I were able to do so, I would be more than willing to risk the terrors of unknown space to prove to you that it can be done. It will be done in time, regardless of what you or anyone else may think. Not by me, but by others far better educated than I am.

We wouldn't have the modern improvements we have if their inventors hadn't been brave enough to weather the storm of ridicule that was heaped upon them. We don't want to go back to the cave-man stage, but to go forward to new and better things. A far richer and fuller life than what we have today.

In spite of everything I do enjoy your magazine. The stories I liked best are as follows—

The World Thinker—Jack Vance
The Shadow Dwellers—Frank Belknap Long
The Deconventionalizers—Edmond Hamilton

I hope you are not angry, but I felt as though I had to express my own opinions in regards to your article.

The Sarge isn't angry, M. Katerman (do they call you M. for short, pray chance?). He is just a trifle baffled and a little disappointed. Why in the name of the nine moons of Jupiter (Eeenie, Meenie, Minie, Mo and five others) so many earthlings wish to reach the Earth moon is and always has been a puzzler to him. Actually, it's a cold, airless place, about as attractive as your average city dump on a large scale. But a human called Barnum was apparently right.

What really had the Sarge on edge about *frere* Farnsworth's scrivening was the dire couplet he emerged with along with his opening demand for that bane of Earthkind known in some quarters of the System as moo. Perhaps you, Kiwi Katerman, can make it read sensibly. Ye Sarge gave up after Snaggie, Wart-ears and Frogeyes had all tried it and failed.

But enough such inane bickering, and thanks for the kindlier cracks on TWS, Astrogator Katerman!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

NOW let us look at the roseate fringe of the future and see what lies in store for us when THRILLING WONDER STORIES again returns to Earth.

Superseer Edmond Hamilton takes us a long way ahead with a fine book-length novel called FORGOTTEN WORLD. A brilliant prevision of days to come, it describes that time when, with space travel conquered, humankind has migrated and settled upon distant galaxies, has produced a level of civilization undreamed of today.

Yet occasionally, an acclimated space dweller suffers from a psychiatric neurosis which can only be cured by a trip to Earth, the almost forgotten, still semi-primitive mother planet. And such a man was Carlin, one of the most brilliant engineers of his era.

Disgust at the backwardness of the old world and its penurious inhabitants makes him almost betray his hosts, who are threatening to break all galactic laws by mining the sun for copper, which Earth has been lacking for many long ages. But love of an Earth girl and of the old

(Continued on page 8)

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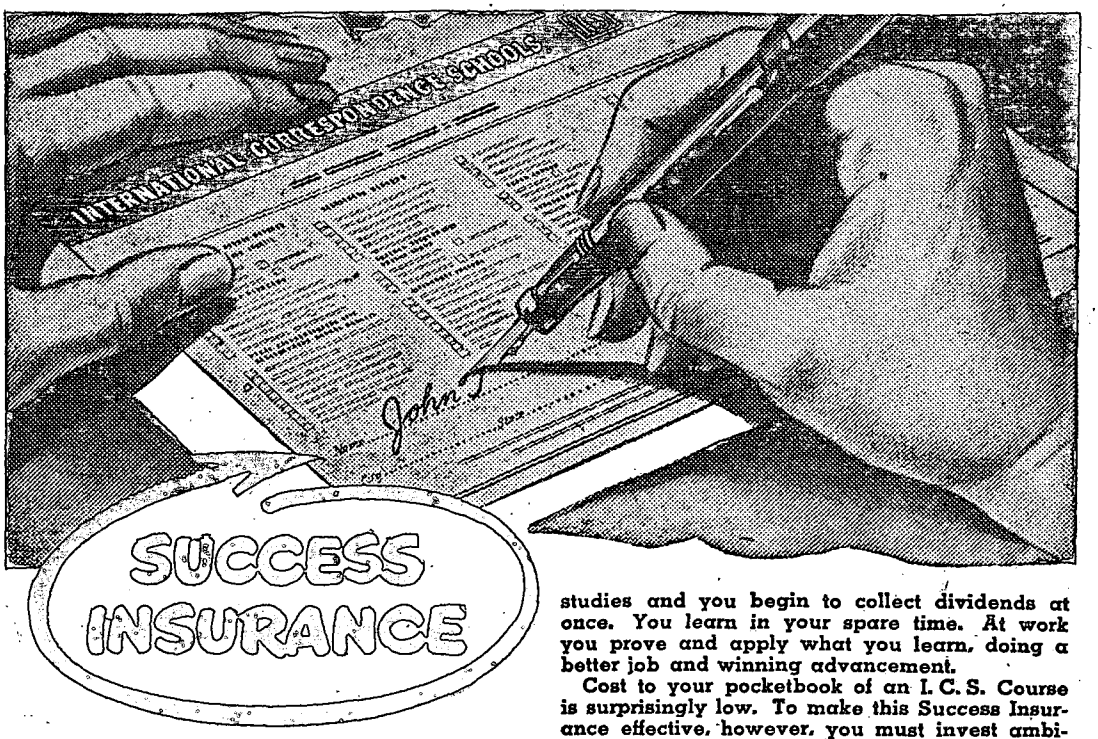

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

planet, an almost atavistic urge to help out, bring him reluctantly into the conspiracy—just as it is exposed to the authorities.

From then on, things happen—and happen fast and with all the vast scope of a space-traveling future. It is one of Hamilton's top-flight jobs, and when the creator of Captain Future is at his best—well, need I say more?

Its novelet companion in our next issue is a brilliant story of the time ahead by Murray Leinster, who, like Hamilton, needs no introduction to TWS readers. In it, he describes the rebellion of Kim Rendell against a too-perfect world of science in which the human element had been all but eliminated—*all but!* And in addition to these fine tales, the next issue will feature plenty of short stories selected from the best that are sent in to us. You'll find it a solid issue packed with entertainment.

LETTERS FROM READERS

VERY well, Wart-eyes, put away the future and bring out the present—yes, I do mean the Xeno, but I mean the letters too. Let's see what Earthfendom, apart from M. Katerman (Snaggie, find out that Kiwi's first name before I split a curiosity tendril) has to say about our tight little crew—and I do mean tight.

First on the list is a tale of disaster and a plea for help from New Zealand. Okay, Frog-eyes, put it on the visoscreen.

HOWL FROM DOWN UNDER

By Jack R. Murtagh

Dear Sarge: A terrible thing has happened to me! I've missed some copies of STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES and am hoping you will be able to publish this so that some of your readers may take pity on me and help me out. The issues I have missed are SS 1939, September, 1940, all; 1941, all; 1942, all; 1943, all—TWS, all issues for 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944.

If any readers have any of the above copies to spare, I would be delighted to hear from them. I have about 30 copies of various science fiction mags I could exchange. And if any readers are stamp collectors, I could perhaps help them with New Zealand issues.

Well, I must think of closing now, so, a question—why do you call your readers Kiwis? A Kiwi you doubtless know is an inhabitant of this country of mine away Down Under and is a wingless bird with

(Continued on page 88)

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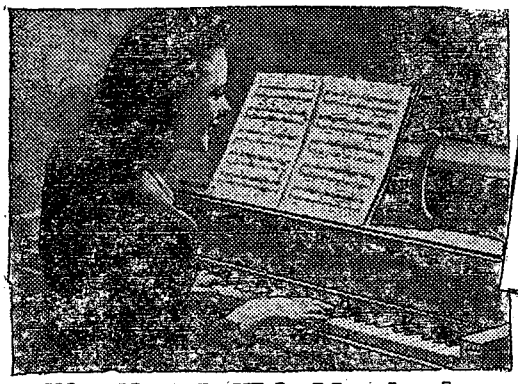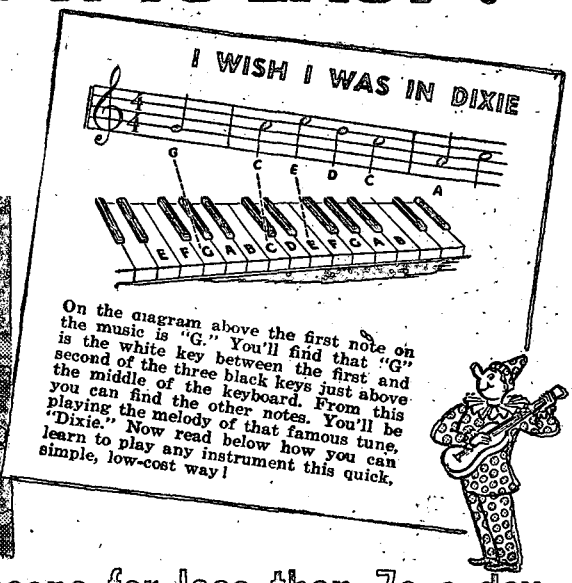

On the diagram above the first note on the music is "G." You'll find that "G" is the white key between the first and second of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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Irelle half turned, lifting her lovely face to Court

Sword of Tomorrow

By HENRY KUTTNER

Trance-borne to a far distant age, Pilot Ethan Court is plunged into peril and adventure on a strange new world where his courage and idealism are put to a stern test!

CHAPTER I

Jap Torture Cell

IT WAS always easier when he sank into the opium-drugged stupor from which not even torture could rouse him. At first he clung to two memories—his rank, and his Army serial number. By focusing his pain-hazed mind on those realities he was able to keep sane.

After a while he didn't want to keep his sanity.

Men can survive a year, or two years, in a Japanese prison camp. They may emerge maimed, spiritually sick, but alive. They remember their own names.

He used to say it aloud at first, in the

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musty darkness of the cell.

"Ethan Court," he whispered to the black, hidden walls. "Ethan Court." And then—"Times Square. Tiffany's. Bretano's. Staten Island. The Yankee Stadium, pop corn, whisky sours, Greenwich Village!"

Presently he noticed that the sound of his voice was different, and after that he scarcely spoke. The horrible lethargy of inaction closed around him. Occasionally, though less often now, he was taken before Japanese officers who questioned him.

He was somewhere in Occupied China, he knew, but since his plane had been forced down, he had been shunted for a long distance by a roundabout route. He guessed that this was a temporary headquarters, probably on the site of some old Chinese town, and he suspected that it was in the hill country. His savage captors told him nothing, of course. They just asked questions.

How much could he disclose in the way of military information, the Japanese did not know. Hard-pressed, they were overlooking no bets. His stubbornness enraged them. The commander of the post, a disappointed samurai of a politically-unpopular family, gradually came to believe that a feud existed between Court and himself. It became a contest between the Japanese officer and the American, entirely passive on one side, ruthlessly active on the other.

Time dragged on, while bombers roared in increasing numbers over Japan and the brown hordes sullenly withdrew from Burma and Thailand and the islands north of Borneo. This headquarters was isolated, but in a strategic spot. The commander saw the tides of war rage past him and recede. The radio gave him no comfort. The Emperor of Japan was silent upon his throne.

A transfer required time. In enforced idleness, the Nipponese commander devoted himself to breaking the will of the American. Torture failed, and so he tried an ancient Japanese trick—opium. It was mixed in Court's food, and, after a while, the craving grew in him. The Jap officer kept his prisoner saturated with the drug. Court's mind dulled.

A MONGOL, Kai-Sieng, was put in Court's cell. He was a prisoner, too, and spoke only a few English words. There had been an uprising, Court gathered. The prison cells of the fort were overflowing. For a month Kai-Sieng remained, and in that time Court learned of the deceptive Peace of the Poppy.

Curious conversations they had there in the dark—scraps of English and Chinese and lingua franca. The Mongol was a fatalist. Death was inevitable, and meanwhile he had killed very many Japanese. The taunts and torments he had undergone had not moved him. He knew the hiding-place of his Chinese guerrilla leader, but the Japs would not learn it from him.

"They cannot touch me," he told Court. "The part of me that is—myself—is sunk deep in a well of peace."

Yes, he smoked opium. Kai-Sieng said, but it was not that alone. He had been in Tibet, at a lamasery. There he had learned something of the secret of detaching the soul from the body.

Court wondered.

In military classes, he himself had studied psychonamics, that strange weapon of psychological defense that is, in essence, self-hypnotism. Here in a prison cell in China, from the mouth of a rancid-smelling Mongolian guerrilla, he was learning an allied science—or mysticism.

He told Kai-Sieng something of his fears, that he would go mad, or that he would be unable to endure the tortures. His will was weakening under the impact of the cannabis indica, and he was afraid that eventually he would talk.

"Turn their own weapons against them," the Mongolian said. "The poppy smoke is the opener of the gate. I will teach you what I can. You must learn to relax utterly in the central peace of the universe."

Mysticism, yes, but it was merely a rephrasing of psychonamic basics. There was no candle-flame to focus Court's attention. He was sick, body and soul, and relaxation was impossible.

If his lips ever came unsealed, he might blurt out everything—including a certain bit of military information that no Japanese knew he possessed. It was vital that the enemy should not get that information, how vital only Court and a few three-star generals in the Eastern Theatre knew. Suicide was impossible. He was watched too closely for that. And so, with his eyes open, Court walked into the trap his captors had set and became an opium addict.

Kai-Sieng showed him the way. The Japanese were only too glad to supply a layout, and Court found the Peace of the Poppy. But under the Mongolian's guidance he learned something else, the psychonamic defense that had come out of a Tibetan lamasery. It was hard at first, but the opium helped.

He visualized the sea, deep, calm, immense, and he let himself sink into the fathomless depths. The farther down he went, the less the outside world mattered. Soaked in opium, his mind drowning in a shoreless ocean, he sank into the blue deeps, and day by day he left the prison farther behind. It was psychic science of a high order, but the Japanese

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Lovely feminine forms beckoned to Court, and one had the dazzling face of Irelle

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commander did not understand. He thought that Court's will was growing more pliant, that soon he could successfully question a mind-dulled, helpless dupe.

Kai-Sieng was taken away and shot. Dreamily Court knew what was happening. It did not matter. Nothing mattered, really. For only the azure sea was real, that profound deep that took him into its protective embrace and kept him safe.

The opium supply stopped, The Japs had grown suspicious. But they were too late. Not even the craving of Court's body for the drug could wake him from his blue dream. Not even torture, inhuman and ruthless, could bring life back into his eyes. He had gone down the ancient Tibetan road and found peace.

But he was not dead. His body, inactive, required less and less fuel. It was not inhabited. His mind had gone elsewhere. Like the blue-robed lamas who are reputed to live for a thousand years in the Himalayan peaks, Court was prolonging his life-span by—resting. The machine of his corporeal existence was idling. Dimly, in the heart of the machine, the life-spark flickered.

He did not know it. He did not know his name any more. He remembered nothing. He rocked endlessly in the limpid blue vastness, while the armies swept across the face of the world, and Fujiyama's white cone reflected the red of burning cities. He slept, while the shark-faced planes flew above him, and while the buildings exploded in thundering ruin. He slept, while his cell was sealed in crashing destruction, and the seal was crimsoned with Japanese blood. He still slept, though above him, on the surface of the earth, smoked a lifeless rubble where a Japanese fortress once stood.

Hermetically locked there in the dark, Ethan Court lay at rest. In Tibetan monasteries ancient priests slept similar sleeps, and woke, and finally died. The earth swung in its tremendous orbit around the sun, and warring nations were stilled.

And there was peace—for a little while.

* * *

The awakening took many, many years. The specialized human body is a fragile organism, and enormously complicated. A man who has slept for—ages—does not start up as from a half-hour's doze. Moreover, the peculiar psychic factor that made Court's slumber possible also made his quickening a slow process.

There was air, first. It filtered through a crack in the rubbled roof and stole into Court's nostrils. Oxygen crept into his stilled lungs and infiltrated the nearly motionless blood-stream. The red corpuscles fed upon it, and the vital spark, slowly and gradually, flamed brighter.

But in his mind there was no awareness. The blue seat was deep. A little troubled, now—but only a little.

Finally men found him.

He did not know it when a dark, bearded face peered down into his cell, and when a torch was lowered. He did not hear the cry of amazement in an alien tongue. Nor did he sense that he was being carried, in a rough litter, to a village hidden amid mountain peaks.

HIS clothing had long since rotted, but the corroded metal of his dog-tags was still looped on a rusty chain about his neck. The tribesmen put the tiny plates in a sacred place, and, at the command of their priest, they tended Court. Perhaps some hint of the holy Tibetan lamas had filtered down through the ages, for they recognized Court's sleep as something mystic and sacred.

They washed him and rubbed his emaciated body gently with oil. They pressed between his lips the warmed milk of the kharam, which had not existed in the Twentieth Century, and some times they prayed to him.

The priest himself watched with tired, wise eyes, and wondered. His people had no written history, only folk-tales that faded into superstitious legends of the day when the gods had destroyed the world—the gods who strode with enormous, crashing strides and left flame behind them. So he wondered.

Meanwhile the peaceful life of the nomads went on. They bartered and hunted, and among them, presently, moved the gaunt figure of Ethan Court, unshaved and strange in a native tunic. But behind his eyes the —soul—had not wakened.

A psychiatrist might have guessed the answer. There was psychic trauma present, induced by shock and nurtured by the blue seas in which Court's awareness still hung quiescent. A part of his mind roused. He learned the language, word by word—it was not complicated—and he would play quiet games with the children, a blue-eyed, bearded spectre from the past. He became accepted as part of the community life. He was not holy any more. Familiarity had altered that. But his hosts were friendly, and the priest spent long hours trying to find the key to Court's soul.

Then a change came. A new face swam into the dark mirror of Court's realization, and afterward, frighteningly new things. He sank deeper, protectively, into the blue sea. For he was flying again. That terrified him. He scarcely sensed his altered surroundings, the lush magnificence of rainbow plastics and dim music, and he tried not to realize that there were tiny pin-pricks of pain now and then in his arms and legs.

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But something was troubling the waters. Something reached down inexorably toward him, groping, seizing, pulling him to the surface.

Always, now, voices spoke to him in this new language he had learned. They were urging him to—to seek someone. Who? They did not know, but they said that *he* knew. They commanded him to remember—what?

A name.

Whose name?

The blue sea was becoming very shallow. Waves of troubling, strange music beat upon him. Color and light quivered and shook before his puzzled eyes.

The name was—Court. Ethan Court!

The blue oblivion washed back. It was torn asunder like a veil. It fled far away and was gone, and into the place where it had been came rushing the memories of the man who had been Ethan Court.

For he remembered now. He was awake. And, in the moment of that awakening, he knew that he was in a new world.

CHAPTER II

Air Accident

THE tense faces ringing him altered. He heard a soft "Ah'h" of satisfaction from many lips. Involuntarily he scowled, his glance flicking from eye to eye. He was half-reclining in a curious sort of chair. It was a bulky chair, with coils of tubed light twining about it. A circle of men stood facing him, watching.

His lips tightened.

"What's going on here?" he said in English. "Where am I?"

One man, completely bald, with a close-fitting white garment revealing his skinny figure, waved the others back. He spoke a tongue that Court understood.

"Leave me alone with him now. He is awake. Call Barlen. Notify the Throne. Out, now!"

They trooped out through a door that lifted silently in the wall. Court lifted himself out of the chair where now the shining coils had dulled. His body felt like an old friend. He had been using it without realization for a long while, and he was in good physical condition. Looking down, he saw that he was wearing a blue-and-brown figured tunic of light, pliable material, and shorts of the same color. There were shoes of elastic, translucent plastic on his feet.

The room had a strange, exotic appearance. The walls shimmered with color, soft pastels, abstract designs that were curiously soothing in their effect. The furnishings consisted of a few couches and a littered table. Court had never before seen such furniture or such a room.

The bald man was coming toward him. Court, still frowning, spoke in the new language.

"What is this? I asked you where I am? Am I a prisoner?"

"No, you're no prisoner," the man said. "You've been a patient. I'm Tor Kassel. Can you understand me easily?"

Court nodded, still wary. "This place is what?"

"My home." Kassel hesitated. "You know your name?"

"Naturally. But that's about all I do know."

"Is it?" The dark eyes were intent. "Your memories haven't returned?"

Court shook his head wearily. "I'm mixed up. I expected something else. But this is right, somehow."

"It is quite right." Kassel's voice was gentle. "There are a few things you should know before you can completely readjust yourself. As for your health—it is perfect. For five months you have been here, under my care. Let me see if my theory is correct. First, are thirsty? Or hungry?"

"No," Court said. "I just want to know where I am."

Tor Kassel rested his thin hand on the table. "You were in an underground place. There you fell asleep. You caused that sleep yourself. It was a hypnosis, self-induced."

"The opium," Court said suddenly. He used the English word. Kassel stared.

"Opium?"

"A—a drug I smoked. It helped me to fall asleep. It was habit-forming."

"You do not have the habit now," Kassell said. "Take my word for it. The reason—well, you slept in that hidden place, and time passed. A very long time."

Court felt his anger rise. "I know quite well it was a long time. Don't treat me like like a child. How long? A thousand years?" Once the words were out, he felt their improbability.

Kassel hesitated. "I don't know. We can estimate the period after you give us a few facts—the positions of the stars in your era. Our history goes back only a thousand years."

"Who are you? What race?"

"We are Lyrans. That means nothing to you, does it?"

"No." Court mused. "A thousand years. Why, only that far back? What year is this? Three thousand something?"

"Seven-eighty-four," Kassel told him. "Dating from the time of the First Pact, when a few wandering tribes banded together."

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"All right. Maybe I don't understand you."

"You have a barbarous accent, and you haven't learned our colloquialisms," Kassel said. "But you learned the language very well during your stay with the Mouranee nomads. You were—mentally asleep—then, but you must have been with the Mouranee for several years."

"I want a mirror," Court said abruptly.

THE bald man walked to one of the shimmering walls and made an odd gesture. An oval in the bright surface dimmed and turned silver.

"Here," Kassel said.

Court moved forward hesitantly, uneasily. Whatever he expected to see, it was not the old Ethan Court, of course. But neither had he expected to see a grimy, beared savage. Yes, he had grown older. There were streaks of white at his temples, and his brown face was thinner. Deep lines bracketed his lips. Under scowling dark brows his blue eyes were sparkling suspiciously.

Kassel remained near him, talking. "An ethnologist and historian of our race found you with the Mouranee tribe. They learned what they could of your history. You had been found, half-alive, in an ancient, underground chamber. The Mouranee took you to their village and treated you."

"I remember," Court said. "Yes, I remember that." He touched his lips with hesitating fingers. This flesh—still firm and alive after more than a thousand years? Perhaps more than—ten thousand!

But he could not believe that. Kassel had cupped something small and bright in his palm.

"These were found with you. Our scientist could not read them, naturally, but he recognized some of the letters and figures. A very ancient tongue—it is a lost language today, except for a few transcriptions on metal that we cannot decipher."

He dropped the objects in Court's hand. Newly-polished, they were shockingly familiar. Suddenly they were the only real thing in this alien place. Name—blood type typhoid shot—serial number.

Kassel went on. "You were brought here. We guessed the possible importance of our find. Suspended animation is possible today, but that it should have existed in your era is extraordinary. When was it?"

"Nineteen-forty-four," Court said. "Or Nineteen-forty-five. I don't know."

"Well, that doesn't tell me much, I'm afraid. Our chronology is different. What were you?"

The man's meaning was clear. "Artist, once. And soldier, after that."

Sudden relief showed in Kassel's hairless face. "Good. There are artists today, but no soldiers. We have peace, or we have had. Court, you must be instructed regarding our times."

The door opened. Through it came a giant figure, a ruddy-faced man with a golden spade beard and mane of yellow hair. His clothes were garishly flamboyant. Sweat beaded his high cheek-bones.

"Tor Kassel," he said hurriedly. "I came for the patient." He saw Court. "He is awake, then!"

"He's awake."

"Good! Come with me, you! At once!"

Kassel's eyes gleamed. "What the devil do you mean? This is my home, Barlen! This man Court is my patient. He'll go with you if I permit it. Not otherwise."

Court's gaze moved from face to face.

"Do I have anything to say about this?" he asked.

Barlen stared. Kassel nodded.

"Certainly. You may do as you choose. And I'll see that no one tries to bring pressure." He glared at the big man.

Barlan's teeth gleamed amid his yellow beard as he grinned.

"So I must apologize again," he said. "To you—my friend—and to you—Tor Kassel, I make my excuses. Forgive my impatience. But you'll admit I have reason., Kassel."

"Perhaps you do. Yes, I think you do. Just the same, Ethan Court is still my patient."

"He's something more than that." Barlen showed his teeth. "The Throne is interested."

"I've notified the Throne."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"For a little courtesy," Kassel snapped, and swung to Court. "The Throne—our ruler—has been much interested in your progress. There's an interview scheduled. But it's to be at your convenience, for I don't want you to overexert yourself."

COURT could not suppress a smile. "Am I healthy now, Kassel?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I'm certainly curious. I'm ready any time."

"Do you want me to go on my knees to him, Kassel?" Barlen said impatiently. "My car's outside."

"I want nothing except a little consideration," the doctor mumbled. "National emergency or not, medicine still has its rights."

"Come on, Court," Barlen said. "If you're ready."

Clutching his dog-tags, Court followed the huge Barlen through the doorway, Kassel at his heels. Down a winding spiral ramp they went, past walls that shivered and

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murmured with sound and color, and emerged into a porte-cochere where a car stood—a huge, sleek bath-tub, apparently—with a padded bench circling its interior. A simplified control-pedestal rose in the center, easily reached from any point within the car. Barlen stepped in, the others following, and waved them to seats.

"We fly," he said, with simple pride. Court looked at him.

"So did we," Court said, and the giant blinked.

"Well." He touched levers. "You'll see."

The car slid out into darkness.

Then there was the odor of green growing things and cool, fresh night air, and Court felt the car rising. Without a sound it slanted up. He sat motionless, staring at the loveliness of the city spread below. It was a city of rose and pearl.

"What could I expect?" he told himself. "This is the future. Naturally things are different. Naturally."

Valyra, the central city of Lyra, lay clustered about a low mountain, spreading down from its slopes into the distant darkness. It glowed with a warm radiance that outlined the gracious curves of domes and roadways, and the dreams of a hundred architects had made the city into a single unit of beauty. Each curve subtly led the eye to the central mountain.

There, on the summit, stood a domed palace, fragile looking and shining.

"Did you have this?" Barlen's voice held smug triumph.

"No," Court said. "Nothing like this. No."

His hand tightened on two bits of metal, for abruptly the elfin city was horrible to him. He didn't want perfection. He wanted craggy, dirty blocks of concrete, granite, brick and steel, towering above Sixth Avenue. He wanted to hear the nerve-grinding roar of a subway. He wanted to smell of hot-dogs roasting in an open-front Nedick's shop. He wanted to look down at a city that wasn't perfectly planned and executed—a place with the homely name of New York or Pittsburgh or Denver, where brownstone stood next to chrome, and where pushcarts stood beside sleek limousines.

He didn't want this. It wasn't fair. He was an ordinary man. There had been a war, and he'd been in it. But this wasn't all right. It was wrong that he should have fallen into some sort of mystic sleep in a dungeon in China, and wakened after thousands of years had passed.

Rose and pearl—bah! It was a fine set-up

Court flung himself forward, straight at the man with the ray-gun

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for a hero, maybe, but he wasn't a hero and he didn't want to be one.

All that he had seen was fairy-tale stuff. That covered it. He didn't fit into fairy tales. This golden-bearded giant, beside him, probably lived on a steady diet of romance. But it wasn't Court's meat.

He gripped his dog-tags desperately and shut his eyes, wishing and praying to be back in the familiar yellow mud of China. Anywhere, in fact, but this cake-icing city in a time that wasn't Ethan Court's time.

"Look out, Barlen!" he heard Kassel say. "That car's coming too close!"

"Fools!" Barlen rumbled. "They'll hit us."

The big man raised a warning shout.

"Grapples! Hold them, Kassel! I'll protect Court."

Mighty arms swept about Court, lifting him from his seat. One glimpse he had of an air-car sweeping forward. Silvery rods, like tentacles were reaching out, and dark faces were intently watching. Then Barlen sprang over the side, gripping Court to his barrel chest, and the two of them went plunging downward through the emptiness of the night.

CHAPTER III

The Blue-Eyed Girl

BY INSTINCT he reached for the ring of a rip-cord that wasn't there. He heard himself automatically counting. They turned over slowly as they fell, but Barlen kept his strong grip on Court. Above them the unlighted air-cars were lost against the sky.

Court felt Barlen writhe. The city was rushing up at them with sickening speed, so close now that details were visible. But as Barlen moved, a coruscating shell of color blotted out vision. Hands of iron seemed to seize every part of Court. Next came a wrenching jolt so violent that it threatened to dislocate his neck. But soon he was floating down slowly through a curtain of light.

Faster now—and faster.

He struck hard, tangled with Barlen, and the shimmering colors faded and were gone. The giant jerked him to his feet, and gave a swift glance around.

"They may follow. In here, quick."

"But Kassel! What of him?"

"I don't know. He's either dead, or a captive. Hurry!"

They had landed on the rounded dome of a roof that glowed with pale pink. With Barlen guiding him, Court slid down precariously to a ledge and crept along it to a window that appeared to be made of mother-of-pearl. Barlen kicked a hole in the oval pane. With a wary glance at the sky, he jumped through the gap, pulling Court after him. They were in a big, empty room furnished with sybaritic magnificence.

Barlen made for the door. As it slid upward at his approach, a man appeared on the threshold, wide-eyed and excited. He was middle-aged and had coal black wooly hair.

"Who're you? What does this mean?"

"Acting for the Throne," Barlen said. "Where's your visor?"

"It's in here. I'll show you. Come."

The man scuttled along the corridor, leading the way. Barlen dragged Court with him. The visor was simply a blank oval in the wall. Barlen made signaling gestures before it. The oval hummed. A pattern of lines like Persian script appeared.

"Acknowledged," a toneless voice said. "Report."

"Enemy air-car directly overhead." Barlen turned to his inadvertent host. "Where are we?"

"Sector Forty, Gamma Three."

"Forty Gamma Three. Possible spies. Not Lyrans, I think. Physician Tor Kassel trying to hold them. Action."

"Acknowledged and action," the voice said. The light faded. Barlen turned away with a shrug.

"They'll send up air-cars to investigate," he said. "I doubt if they'll find anything."

"What about Kassel?" Court asked.

Barlen gestured. "We have enemies, and they're ruthless. They were after you. Word leaked out, I suppose." He hesitated, then looked at the wooly-haired man. "Would you drive us to the palace? Or let us have one of your servants, friend? It's for the Throne."

"Gladly," was the answer. "Are you hurt, Den Barlen?"

"Oh—you know me. No, I'm not hurt. The car?"

"This way."

"We'll go by surface," Barlen explained, as the tub-like vehicle whisked them through glowing streets. "It's safe, I suppose. My repulsor charge is exhausted, anyway. I'll have to get you a tube."

"What was it?" Court asked.

"Anti-gravity. It's not too perfect—you noticed the jolt—and it requires delicate timing. Don't push the stud till you're two hundred feet from the ground. If you release the charge when you're too high, it won't last long enough to bring you down slowly. The mechanisms are bulky. There's room for the complete device in an air-car like this, but in a pocket safety tube, all we can do is install a short charge. It has to be renewed after each use."

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"Who were those men?" Court asked.

THE man at the controls, his face angry, turned his head.

"They must have been the enemy," he said. "Deccans, perhaps. Is that right, Den Barlen?"

"Maybe," Barlen said. "I don't know. Didn't get a good look at them."

"Deccans. They have spies everywhere."

"Well, Deccans or not, they were after you, Court," Barlen said. "I'd have preferred to stay with Kassel and fight, but your life's more important."

"Why?" Court asked.

The giant winked and glanced toward the driver.

"Here's the palace. Thanks, friend. You've helped the Throne tonight."

"And harmed the Deccans, I hope," the man said. He brought the car to a stop.

A few guards, not many, were at this door of the hill-palace. Barlen exchanged a few words with one of them, and was waved inside. Court had an impression of immense spaces and bright colors—then he was in an elevator that rose swiftly. He stepped out, with Barlen, into a good-sized room where a man was awaiting them. Thin, undersized, with a clever, fox-handsome face, the man brushed back his red hair nervously with one hand and smiled at them. Behind him, a spiral ramp led up to a crystal door high above them.

"Hello, Barlen," the red-haired man said. "Is this Court?"

"It's Court, yes. I'm sorry, but the Throne's waiting."

"I'll take him there."

"Go to the devil, Hardony," Barlen said. "Run your sneaking spy-system and let me handle these matters."

Hardony's hand stopped moving across his hair. "It's my job too, you know."

"It's military tactics, not espionage. Come on, Court."

From somewhere a woman's voice spoke angrily.

"Stop quarreling and send Court up here! I want to see him. Barlen! Hardony! Send him alone."

Both men bowed to the wall high in the wall. Barlen waved Court forward.

"Follow the ramp," he said, and grinned. "Don't be nervous. There's nothing to worry about."

Court grimaced and turned to the incline. He walked up the spiral slowly, conscious that the two men below were watching him, red-hair and yellow-beard. So the Throne was a woman. More rose-and-pearl hokum. Smiling crookedly, Court touched the white hair at his temples. Well, he was no Prince Charming.

The Crystal door opened. He stepped through into a bubble of darkness.

There were dim lights, but they paled against the spectacle of Valyra spread around and below. This was, he saw, the highest point of the palace on its mountain-top, and it was a room walled and roofed with material as transparent as glass.

Behind him the door clicked shut.

"I don't know the rules," Court said. His voice was harsh. "Do I bow, or just fall flat on my face?"

"Your dialect is that of a savage," a voice answered. "You act like one, too. Perhaps, though I am too critical. You have been asleep for a long time. Wait."

Slowly a blue glimmer pulsed and grew, faded to pale rose, and spread out into a cool, quiet radiance that filled the room. The city, spread below, lost its colored vividness, and became ghostly, while the chamber became distinct.

It was huge, so great that it was spacious despite the richness of its furnishings. Fragile delicacy of sculptures and curious mobile art-forms contrasted with the massive solidness of heavy tables. Immense carved cabinets, and marble railings could be seen.

Yet the room was a unit. There was no discordant note. Walls and roof were the transparent glass dome. The floor was divided into sectors of shifting tints that faded and wavered and flamed up as Court watched.

Facing him, a few feet, away, was a girl—a very beautiful girl—with red-gold hair and intent blue eyes. She was wearing the briefest of garments. Its dull silver revealed the slim perfection of her body. Except for the richness of her garments, nothing showed her rank.

She settled herself on a divan. Her gaze measured him.

"I've seen you asleep," she said. "That was different. You're awake now."

COURT stared at her, a dull irritation rising within him, though he could not have told why. Slowly her red lips curved into a smile of curiously gentle sweetness. The glamour and strangeness were gone. She was only a girl now, human, approachable, not the ruler of an alien civilization.

"My name's Irelle. I know yours. If you feel able, we'll talk." She smiled. "You may sit down, if you wish."

"Sure," Court seated himself near her. "Sure, let's talk."

"How do you feel?"

He hesitated. "Healthy enough. But I'm not comfortable."

The blue eyes held a touch of pity. "Kassel told me what to expect. You can't remember much, of course. You went to sleep—oh,

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long ago—and suddenly you find yourself in a new world. I know, Court. It's not easy for you."

Her sympathy loosened his tongue. "No, it's tough. I've read stories about such things, but they were fiction. They couldn't happen. Only it has happened. All this doesn't really amaze me. We had science in our day. Anti-gravity's nothing miraculous. The miracle is that I haven't changed."

That was it, he knew. He didn't fit. He was keyed to a different pitch, the world of 1945. This new era, with its rose-pink cities and social culture of which he knew nothing, made him feel helpless and resentful. Long ago his life had been aimed at the goals and ideals of the Twentieth Century. Now those ideals were gone. They were without purpose or meaning. The foundation like those ancient cities where he had lived, had become dust.

Here was a new and alien structure, a civilization grown from a root he had never known.

Irelle seemed to understand something of this. "You will change, of course. I'm no psychologist, but I can put myself in your place. You don't even know what you want now. Isn't that true?"

Court ran his fingers over a cushioned surface that hummed and vibrated under his touch. He drew his hand back quickly, meeting Irelle's eyes.

"Something like that."

"And you're suspicious. There's so much you don't comprehend that you resent it. But that isn't necessary, Court. Especially for you." She watched him. He could sense the interest in her regard.

"Am I to be put on exhibit? Or do I lecture in some university—if there are universities?" But there must be, he thought, or there would have been no word for it in the language. Still, they might be far different from the old Yale or U. S. C.

Irelle touched a mobile object and watched the plastic curves glide and swing into motion, till it resembled a dizzying waterfall. "This. It's meaningless till it's moved. Then it shows its purpose. You, Court—once you begin moving, with a plan—will be like that."

"What plan?"

"I wish Tor Kassel were here," she sighed. "He knows far more than I of the mysteries of the mind. Barlen and Hardony are fine strategists, but the subtleties are beyond them. Our air-cars couldn't find your attacker. Barlen's car was located adrift. Kassel was gone; I suppose they captured him. They want information—"

"Who?"

"Listen," she said, a new light in her eyes. "This is something you'll understand easily, I think. You were a soldier, weren't you? Well, there are no soldiers now."

Court looked at her. "There's no war?"

"Not yet," Irelle said sombrely. "But it will come soon. When it comes, we'll be helpless. You saw what their spies can do—the Deccans. They knew, somehow, of your existence, and they wanted to capture or destroy you. Barlen saved you from that. He'll fight to defend Lyra. But without weapons, he can't do much. Nor can Hardony, though his espinoage corps is well organized."

"Without weapons?" Court asked. "Why haven't you any weapons?"

"Kassel could have explained it better," she said. "Still, I'll try." She took a deep breath. "We cannot make weapons, defensive or offensive. I mean we cannot. Our—our minds refuse to conceive of such ideas. We have scientists. One of our technicians discovered anti-gravity years ago. But there is something deep in our minds—our souls—that locks the door of knowledge. We are creative, but we cannot create a weapon."

"I don't get the idea," Court said. "Even I can see how anti-gravity could be turned into a mighty good weapon."

Irelle's lips parted as she leaned forward. "You were a soldier, Court. But we are the children of destruction. It is, Kassel said, a hereditary conditioned reflex. Or something that grew from a seed in our minds, long before our history began, when the world ended—after your time, and long, long before mine. There is a legend of a Tree in a Garden, and the fruit of that tree was war."

Her face darkened.

Court felt a small, horrible chill crawl down his spine. He sensed now, as never before, that a dreadful strangeness lay hidden behind the loveliness of the rose-pearl city. The ominous drumbeat of the past, like iron seas, boomed far underground.

City of enchantment—it was builded on what bloody dust?

"There is a legend," Irelle said, her voice a whisper. "God placed man in a garden, and said, 'Of the fruit of that tree you shall not eat.' But man disobeyed. And there was war. Then God said, 'Lest you perish utterly, I will give you forgetfulness.'

"And He reached into the minds of men, and, where He touched—something died."

CHAPTER IV

An Offer Is Made

REALIZATION hit him with shocking impact. I'm in the future, he thought. It was one word, familiar enough—some-

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thing he had, until now, taken for granted simply because he had not faced it squarely. He knew the answer now. A remnant of the sheltering blue sea had remained. Lyra, the city Valyra, the air-cars, the alien environment, he had accepted, watching the scene from the viewpoint of a spectator.

But now he knew that he wasn't a spectator. That was the essence of the shock. As long as he remained outside of this fantastic circle of living, he was still safe. It wasn't quite true. Subconsciously the feeling remained that he could dismiss this new world by waking up.

Irelle's dimly-lighted face, human and lovely, was near his own. Behind her, the rippling waterfall of the crystal mobile, had faded, into a dull glow. Beyond that, the great sweep of the dome-wall, and the rose-pearl glow of Valyra, where men and women lived, reared families, ate and bathed, shimmered on.

Under his breast-bone was a dry, a painful ache. He knew what it was. He wanted to go home. He wanted to see the cities he had fought to save, and which he had lived too long over to see again. No death could have been completer than this.

But New York was gone. Chicago was gone. Little lakes in Wisconsin, where fish leaped in the sunlight, the white ribbons of highways cleanly revealed in the shafts of headlights, the movement and turmoil of hotel lobbies—all had vanished. There had been an—amputation. Time had cut cleanly. But men still feel pain in amputated legs.

He thought, I was going back. After the war, I was going back to the States. My family was there, my work, my home—things I worked for and fought for. I needn't have worked. Or fought. It's canceled.

Instead had come a new world. And he didn't give a hoot about it, or about its problems.

Something had died. Well, that was that.

"So you've told me a legend," Court said harshly. "What's the truth?"

Irelle settled back, an odd look of relief in her eyes.

"The truth? We don't know. Our history goes back to the time when we were nomadic tribes, and all mankind was wandering over the face of the earth, without science, struggling just to keep alive. Before that, there was no history. Men did not think. They were too busy. And before that, the world ended. It was a war, I suppose, but such a war as is inconceivable today. Whole continents were blasted."

She gestured. On the floor between them a picture came into view—a world-map, spheroid, slowly revolving.

"Do you recognize this, Court?"

But he could trace no familiar contours. The great land-masses of Africa and the Americas, of Eurasia and Australia had vanished. This was a new world.

"We have only the legends now," she said. "Tales of colossal demons smashing the world with hammers of thunder and fire. In the end, not many men were left alive."

Even in my day, Court thought, there were hammers of thunder. What war could have ended civilization? The Third World War? or the Fourth or Fifth?

New weapons! Weapons out of hell!

"It was madness," Irelle said. "It left a few tribes wandering amid ruin that was more than ruin. Nothing survived but life. In that life remained horror and fear. When, after a long time, science began anew, men could not build weapons. They were afraid. Kassel said there was a psychic block in their minds. Men forget what they do not wish to remember. The subconscious is very powerful. So, when people tried to turn their science to weapon-making, their minds would not work in that direction. They could not do it."

Court nodded. He had seen soldiers, shaken with battle-nerves, totally unable to remember the scenes that had shocked them. It was a protective device created by the

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mind. In a world almost completely destroyed by unimaginable warfare, it might have become a hereditary partial amnesia. Yes, he could understand more clearly now.

"But if there aren't any weapons, how do these Deccans manage?"

IRELLE shook her head gently. "They have weapons," she said. "They were always a warlike race. They have menaced us for many years. Now they plan to attack. We have our own spies, under Hardony. Listen, Court. We are peaceful people, but sometimes wars are necessary."

"Yes," Court said. "I know that."

"We need weapons to protect ourselves. But we cannot conceive of those weapons. We can build them, Kassel said, but our brains cannot originate the ideas. You mentioned a weapon that could be adapted from anti-gravity. Well, never in a thousand years could we plan such a thing practically. We want your help for that."

"An idea man," Court said. "I'm beginning to get it. But I don't like it."

Irelle let out her breath sharply. "I know. You don't realize the necessity, yet. Nevertheless it exists. Please, will you do this? Hold your judgment. Look at our world, and understand it. After a while, I'll ask you again. There will be no pressure brought to bear on you. All we ask is that you look at the truth with unbiased eyes."

Court hesitated. "I—I don't know. I didn't ask for anything like this."

She stood up, holding out her hand. Court rose, and the girl led him across the great room to the transparent wall. Below, the city swept down the slope, its winding streets and skyways dissecting the sprawling, glowing masses.

"Valyra is alive," Irelle said softly. "You've been dead, Court. You don't want to waken, do you?"

It was true. He was thinking longingly of the blue sea that had cradled him for eons.

She half turned. Some indefinable perfume, subtle and sweet as spring, drifted into his nostrils.

"Have you forgotten life?" she said—and lifted her face.

He kissed her, hard and savagely at first, with a fierce resentfulness that refused to admit that this was more than a gesture. Yes, he was dead, and dead flesh does not quicken easily.

But he came back to life with Irelle's lips on his own. Not all of him, perhaps. Perhaps there was a part of Ethan Court that would never waken, that would always remain in the blue sea of the past.

He drew back at last, shaken. His eyes were hard. "Was that what you wanted?" he asked.

Irelle's gaze met his steadily.

"I do not give my kisses promiscuously," she said. "I tried to answer a question for you. Well, is it answered?"

Ethan Court stared at her. For an instant, beneath her softness, her warmth, her radiant beauty, he had detected a hint of steel. Driven to desperation, she could be hard—even ruthless and cruel. But Court was not surprised. She was a queen and queens are usually arrogant. Also, in battle, he had learned to be cruel and ruthless himself.

He looked away. "I don't know. Maybe. I don't know."

"I shall never kiss you again," she said. "Remember that. After all, I am the Throne. When you decide, I will be told. Meanwhile, you are free to do as you like."

"Suppose I say no?" he said brutally. "And I think I'll say no? Suppose I won't show you how to build weapons? Will you kill me then?"

"If you decide that our position will be desperate." She glanced out at the rose-pearl city below. "No, you will not be killed. For then I shall know that Kassel never wakened you from your long sleep. I shall know that you are dead, Court. That you died ages ago, in your old forgotten world."

As Court went out his shoulder brushed the mobile and set it whirling in a blinding cascade of liquid brilliance.

In the days which followed Court tried to adjust himself to this new life. He'd seen fantasy films, in his own area, and he may have expected mile-high machines and sleekly perfected ribbon-roads that carried gleaming robots on their errands. But the truth was somewhat different. It had the difference of reality, which is never perfection.

There were machines, but they were not a mile high, and sometimes they broke down. Sometimes they smelled of burning plastics and haywire lubrication. Court wasn't a mechanic or a technician. He saw a great many wheels going around, and he knew that gadgets of such complexity had not existed in his own era. Nevertheless, they did not leave him stunned. They were only gadgets, after all.

THE giant Den Barlen sponsored him, and Court grew to like the brusque, intolerant military leader. Barlen had one thought—unquestioning loyalty. But there were other traits, a deep sentimentality which Court found strange. To Barlen, Lyra was something more than a country. It was a living entity. Tears would stand in his eyes as he told some old folk-story of his ancestors. There was glamour in Lyra, a strange storybook atmosphere which at times puzzled

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Court. Certainly there was much to puzzle him.

It was an agricultural land chiefly, though there were a dozen large cities beside the capital of Valyra. There were factories, and Court inevitably found himself paying attention to such matters as fuel-sources. Atomic power was unknown, rather to his surprise. There were extremely effective liquid and compressed powdered fuels, and something of special interest to Court was the device that powered the anti-gravity.

In the air-cars was a type of specialized generator, but the parachute rods held a storage charge—a battery, in effect, though electricity was not involved. The Lyrans were able to compress heavy power-charges in metal mechanisms, the strength limited only by the bulk of the container.

He found himself looking at Lyra with the eye of a strategist.

Lyra was not fortified, and would not be easy to defend. Offense, in the case of Lyra, would be the best defense. An enemy air-fleet, equipped with even Twentieth Century bombs, could reduce the land to ruin in a short time.

Demolition bombs could wreck its factories and homes. Fire bombs could scourge its farms and fields. It would be a "milk run"—bombs away, with no opposition.

There were no weapons—none at all. Dozens of times Court saw places ideal for anti-aircraft emplacements, for camouflaged landing fields, for rocket-cradles. But the great factories turned out the artifacts of peace, ploughshares instead of swords. Under other circumstances it would have been close to a Utopian system. No, through Lyra, rustled whispers of threat and danger, of Deccan spies searching for weaknesses, of enemies moving implacably closer.

There were a few weapons, of course, but they were primitive, swords and staves, and the snake-hilted daggers used by Hardony's espionage corps, which served both for defence and as a means of identification. In his own time that particular symbol—the Aesculapian serpents twined about a staff—had meant healing, but now its purpose was surgical only. Hardony's men were well-trained, Court discovered. They covered Lyra in a network, careless of their own lives, and were fanatically loyal to the Throne. But he thought that they were not too fond of Hardony himself.

Barlen did not like the red-haired espionage chief.

"I don't trust him," he told Court. "Hardony pretends to believe in nothing. He's cynical and he's a cruel brute. Striking in the dark with a dagger is his style."

Barlen grinned savagely through his yellow beard. Yes, Barlen hated Hardony!

CHAPTER V

Deccan Enemies

DURING the days which followed, Court grew to believe Barlen was prejudiced about Hardony. Court began to see a good deal of the spy chief and, although Hardony was cynical, Court found he was refreshingly free from hypocrisy. Often Court had chances to have long talks with the red headed man, for Barlen's duties frequently called him away. Soon Hardony began to invite Court to go with him on various expeditions—sometimes on business for the Throne.

"You know a city by its dives," the red-head said one night, as they sat in a dim tavern filled with an almost intolerably heavy perfume.

The room was low-roofed and enormous, artificial white perfumed fogs drifting about in dim veils, and off-beat music humming from somewhere. The drinks were unfamiliar, but they were intoxicating. Hardony watched a foppish, silk-clad youth laughing. He was seated on a nearby dais.

"That man, for example," Hardony said. "What do you make of him, Court?"

"He's nervous," Court theorized. "He hasn't looked at you once since we came in. He isn't as drunk as he pretends."

Hardony nodded. "But he knows who I am. That girl next to him told him. I don't know him, though. He's a visitor from some other city, or a Deccan spy. Have you wondered why Barlen and I spend so much time with you?"

"No," Court said. "I'm being guarded?"

"Right. If you know that, do you know why?"

"The Deccans?"

"They tried to capture you once. They're not fools. They've probably more right to survive than our race has, if you apply the law of survival of the fittest. They learned about you almost as soon as you were bought here, and naturally they want you—either to use your knowledge, or to kill you."

"They sound bloodthirsty," Court said.

Hardony smoothed back his red hair. "Necessity. I'd kill you myself, if that was the only way of saving you from falling into Deccan hands. But there'd be no animosity in it—nothing personal. Simply logic."

Court grinned. "I see your point. However, I'd be apt to resist."

"If everybody thought alike, there'd be less trouble," Hardony said, sipping a bluish liquor with streaks of gold curling through it. "This isn't a unified nation by any means.

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We've got factions. Any large social group has. So it takes a strong hand to rule. Luckily the Throne's hereditary, and people are automatically loyal to Irelle. That's ingrained. But too many of them try to interpret their own schemes for living. Many hate me because I know that a strong espionage force is necessary. You can't mould clay with clay. It takes a knife. I'm the knife."

"What about Barlen?"

"A dull knife," Hardony said gently. "If he didn't hold a rank equal to my own, he'd be a useful tool. As it is, his bothersome military machine comes into conflict with my corps at every opportunity. Fidelity's necessary—my men don't love me, but they obey me. And Barlen's men follow him. His men hate mine, which doesn't matter so long as a strong hand keeps Lyra unified. If we fell into chaos, the Deccans would have no trouble in taking over."

"I've seen no signs of chaos," Court said.

"You wouldn't. It's under the surface. But it's there." Hardony grimaced. "Barlen's a romanticist. He sees what he wants to see. To him, Lyra's a land of honey and cream, with soft music and pink babies and bright flowers everywhere. I know what's under that. I think you know, too. Human beings aren't nice. They're vermin, with the instincts and rottenness of vermin. Lyrans are no better than any other race. Deccans are vermin too. Do you wonder I'm hated?" He smiled crookedly.

"Yet you're doing an efficient job," Court said. "I wonder why?"

"So I won't have to crawl with the rest of the vermin," Hardony said, finishing his drink. "It's no fun wriggling in the mud. My legs were built to stand on."

"And to stand on others, maybe?"

HARDONY gave Court a quick glance. "Who'd run the espionage corps if I didn't?" the spy chief demanded. "Barlen? He hasn't the intelligence. He'd blunder ahead, and one day the Deccans would be ready, and Lyra would go down fast. This isn't a perfect land by any means, but it's the best one available. I intend to keep it so, if I can." He looked at Court shrewdly. "You've been here several weeks now, and I suspect you beginning to feel impatient."

"Impatient for what?"

"Bored, then. Being a spectator isn't sufficient."

Court turned his goblet idly between his palms. He didn't say anything.

Hardony shrugged. "Let's go. I've an errand to do tonight. Come along. You'll find it interesting."

"All right." The heavy perfume that filled the tavern was drugging; Court was ready to leave. He followed Hardony, threading his way among the raised platforms toward the door. The music hummed faintly in the dim, cloudy radiance.

Someone cried out sharply. Court glanced back, searching for the source, and stiffened. A dais had been overturned, and a heavy, dark-clad figure was sprinting forward, shouting.

"Hardony!" the man yelled. "Watch out!"

He was running toward the platform where the foppish youth had been sitting. The youth was on his feet now, in a swirl of rainbow silks, something blue and glittering in his hand. He was struggling to release himself from the girl who clung to him. She was desperately trying to gain possession of the weapon. A curtain of rosy fog drifted between them, half veiling the pair from Court's eyes.

It was over very quickly—before Court could recover from his surprise. The silk-clad youth wrenched his arm free. A ray of brilliant, pale light shot out, striking the girl full on her breast.

She stiffened, head thrown back, mouth a square of screaming agony.

She dropped—lay motionless.

The running man who had warned Hardony had almost reached his goal, the killer. But he was not swift enough. Again the white ray lanced out, splashing over dun cloth and brown skin.

Momentum carried the victim forward in a hurtling rush. He crashed against the dais and toppled, his cry dying out.

Beyond the rosy cloud-veil the figure of the youth seemed to loom gigantic. He swung around, eyes blazing, and his glare centered on Court.

"Ethan Court!" he shouted.

The blue weapon rose.

Court flung himself forward, bending low. But he knew that he could not hope to reach his opponent in time.

Over his head a whistling streak raced. Through the distortion of the mists he saw something flicker toward the killer and smash home upon his forehead.

The foppish youth dropped without a sound.

Then came tumult. Court, recovering his balance, saw Hardony run past him, a sub-sonic whistle at his lips. The espionage chief, grinning fiercely, caught up the blue weapon and thrust it into a pocket. He knelt beside the unconscious man, beckoning to Court.

"What the devil, Hardony! What's it all about?"

"I don't know. Lucky my aim's accurate." Hardony recovered his snake-headed dagger, drove it into its scabbard, and indicated the rising welt on the prostrate man's brow. "You were right, anyway. Our friend here

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wasn't as drunk as he seemed."

Hardony hesitated, and then, with a swift motion, tore open the youth's tunic at the throat. He reached up, took a half-filled glass, and spilled the liquor over the bared chest. With a scrap of silk he scrubbed at the smooth skin.

Beneath dissolving pigments the ghost of a symbol began to show—a cross within a circle.

A GASP went up from the surrounding crowd.

"A Deccan," someone said.

"That's the Deccan sign, Court," Hardony said quietly. "A spy." He stood up, frowning.

Uniformed figures were filtering in now, unobtrusively taking over, summoned by their chief's sub-sonic whistle. Hardony beckoned to one.

"Court, go with this man. I want you in a safe place."

"I'm staying here."

"Don't be a fool. I'll use force if I have to. You're unprotected against such weapons as the Deccans seem to have, and this spy may not have been alone. Go along, now."

A hand gripped Court's arm. Unwillingly he let himself be urged toward the door. The musky perfume of the tavern gave place to the crisp freshness of the night air.

Back in the apartment that had been furnished him, Court began to pace nervously, longing for a cigarette and gradually growing more restive. There were guards at the door, he saw. Till now, they had at least kept out of sight. The hours dragged past, until Court felt about ready to explode. At last the door slipped upward. He whirled, ready to vent his annoyance on Hardony—but it was the giant Den Barlen who entered.

His yellow beard was bristling, his blue eyes were ablaze. Over his shoulder he snarled an oath at the guards.

"I'll deal with Hardony myself! Since when does he deny Den Barlen entrance anywhere in Lyra?" The big man moved swiftly to Court, gripped the latter's shoulders with hard hands.

"You're all right? You weren't injured?"

But Court was in no mood for sympathy.

"I can take care of myself," he growled, pulling free. "If you can order those guards around, tell them to let me out of here."

"No," Barlen said. "He's right in that one thing. But in nothing else. Taking you out—unguarded—in the dives where anyone could slip a knife between your ribs—it's disgraceful! He isn't capable of protecting you. All he can do is hatch his rotten, twisted plots."

"I told you I wasn't hurt," Court snapped.

"But you might have been. I came as soon as I got word. From now on you're under my protection, and mine only."

His eyes dark with suppressed anger, Court faced the giant. His lips were tight.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "Too much. I'm used to being a human being. For three weeks I've been carried around like a baby, showed this and that, treated like a semi-invalid. Bah! I know how to feed myself! The next time I see a guard trailing me, I'm going to knock his teeth loose."

That made Barlen pause. His face troubled, the giant muttered under his breath, uneasily fumbling at his beard.

"You—well, perhaps you're right. I can see your point of view. But it isn't only that, Court. You're in a very special position."

Court grimaced. "I'm an ordinary mug who overslept. Nothing more."

"It's not all," Barlen said firmly. "You're not a super-intelligent person or anything like that. We've got brains of our own in Lyra. But you've got one faculty that's completely missing from the race—the creatively aggressive spirit. Lyra's like a machine that's fueled and ready to work. Yet she's without means of making the spark that'll activate the fuel. You're that spark, Court. Unless the machine begins to move under its own power—and that soon—it will be crushed."

"It will be crushed to powder unless it explodes first because of internal tension," a new voice broke it. Hardony walked into the room, red hair catching the light, a half-mocking smile on his face. "Court, you're either Lyra's saviour or its destruction. I'm not sure which, yet."

Scarlet mounted to Barlen's cheeks. "If there's trouble, you're behind it, red fox! I half suspect you of aiming at Court's death yourself."

Hardony groaned wearily. "Don't be that much of a fool, Den Barlen. I could have killed Court a hundred times before now, if I'd wanted that. But I don't. He must make weapons for us, that's all."

"What happened tonight?" Barlen demanded. "A Deccan spy in Green Tavern?"

"Yes. He tried to murder Court—to wipe out the knowledge in his brain before it could be used. He failed, though. He managed to kill a woman there, and one of my operatives."

"What was that weapon he had?" Court asked.

HARDONY made a small, wry sound. "I don't know. It was turned over to our technicians to analyze. And it exploded as they were working on it. One of them is dead, two seriously wounded. The spy—we questioned him. But he apparently doesn't know the mechanism. He was given it, with

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rders to kill Ethan Court."

"And you took Court down to Green Tavern!"

Hardony shrugged. "It's showed me one thing, anyway. We'll have to move fast. There's unrest everywhere. The people know about Court. Word's got out. That filthy Underground Group—they take orders from the Deccans, and they're starting dissension. Barlen, your own men would start a fight with my agents at the least excuse."

"What is this Underground Group?" Court asked. "I've heard something about them, but not much."

"It's some sort of secret organization," Hardony said. "Traitors and criminals. They should be stamped out and they will be."

Abruptly Hardony slipped up his sleeves, revealing a blood-stained bandage about his biceps.

"I got this coming here through the streets. Yes—there's dissension."

"Who did it?" Court asked.

"I don't know. He escaped."

"It might have been anybody," Barlen said unpleasantly. "Anybody who recognized you, that is."

The two men looked at each other, bristling. Then Hardony let his sleeve fall back into place and laughed softly.

"I think it's time for you to decide, Court. For we can't promise you a home indefinitely. If the Deccans don't invade first, there'll probably be civil war, and if not that, somebody's apt to kill you for not aiding us when you've got the knowledge we need."

Court hesitated. "But the Deccans have some sort of death-ray. I don't know anything about weapons of that type."

Barlen gripped his shoulder. "Bosh! Any weapons will do. A fair chance is what we want. We'll fight 'em with swords if we have to."

Court was remembering the girl the Deccan spy had killed so ruthlessly. He was still angry about that.

"The Throne wants to see you," Hardony said. "Will you come?"

"Why not?" Court said. For he had made his decision.

CHAPTER VI

Globe of Colors

ETHAN COURT had no reason to change his mind as, with Barlen and Hardony, he hurried through the night, via air-car, toward the palace on the mountain. Beneath him Valyra hummed with music. But under its beat he could detect an ominous and growing tension, a discordance that might swell into a shattering, cataclysmic fury. Here was a land strained to the breaking-point, threatened by invasion, wanting only weapons.

The Throne—Irelle—was waiting in one of the great reception halls, an enormous room crowded with the gaily-clad nobles of Lyra. A strained anxiety pervaded in the palace, too. Irelle was talking to an enormously fat man whose gross body was incongruously clad in fluttering silks, red, purple, and green. He looked like a mediaeval jester, Court thought.

"We need supplies," the fat man was saying unhappily, his pouting lips scarlet against the sagging whiteness of his cheeks. "No supplies. I must have them. The least one can expect is to live with a minimum of comfort."

"That is out of my province," Irelle said patiently. "Technical supplies are needed elsewhere, Farr. You know that."

Farr tugged at a green tassel on his bulging stomach.

"Surely a few appliances to help keep me in comfort wouldn't be missed?"

Barlen clapped his hand on the fat man's back. "Comfort, Farr? You've got luxuries in your castle which would keep most men busy, although I don't envy you them. What brings you away from your dreams?" His voice was mocking.

Farr drew himself up. "My pleasures are my own affair," he said sharply. "I interfere with no one else. I ask only to be let alone, and to have a few supplies when I need them."

"Those supplies are needed elsewhere," Irelle said. "You've forgotten that there are other worlds than your dream-ones. Lyra is, I think, more important."

"But I require so little!"

Irelle cut him short. "Barlen, Hardony, Court—come with me." She turned, and led them into a small adjoining chamber.

"Well?"

Hardony spread his hands. "It's entirely up to Court now. I can do no more. My men are ready, but have no weapons."

"My men are equally ready," Barlen said.

Irelle looked at Court. "I heard what happened tonight. It seems to me I'd be justified in resorting to—anything—to save Lyra. Even torture." Her blue eyes were hard now.

Court was silent.

"Listen to me," she lashed out at him. "Thus far you have refused me weapons. You come from the past, from a world that destroyed itself by its own vileness, and you presume to sit in judgment on us. On Lyra! Are you God, then?" Her voice had become shrewish. Her face contorted with fury.

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"No," Court said. "No, I'm not God."

"Then—what?"

"I'll help you. There's nothing else I can do. I see that now." His voice was very low. "The world isn't ready for peace even yet. I didn't sleep long enough."

Barlen's triumphant oath rattled against the ceiling. "Good, Court! Good! You were a soldier once, and you're still one. With weapons we'll have a chance against the Deccans."

Hardony's smile twisted into faint wryness. "It took you long enough," he said. "But perhaps that's a good thing. Lyra's at white-hot pitch now, and can be moulded easily. Once the people know you're with us, you—you may be God, after all."

Court was watching Irelle. Her hard lips had softened, he saw, and the spark had gone from her eyes. Once more she looked like the woman who had kissed him—not the ruler who coldly threatened torture.

"So you did not die, then," she said, and only Court knew what she meant....

A half hour later Court walked alone on a terrace of the palace, waiting and pondering. Above him an alien sky was glittering with cold stars, immutable as eternity itself, compared to the chotic affairs of mankind. Beyond the balustrade lay Valyra, a rose-pearl stain against the night. Behind him the palace seethed with subdued excitement.

Soon, now, technicians and scientists, long held in readiness, would be gathered together.

"Speeches aren't necessary," Hardony had said. "They want to ask you questions. They want a basis to work on, and there's no time to waste. Even a single night lost now might be disastrous."

COURT did not know what to say. How could he describe the world in which he had lived? It was the little things that he remembered most clearly, a tree-lined street, green and cool on a blazing summer day, kids bicycling along it, an ice-cream wagon driving slowly along, bell tinkling. He didn't want to talk about weapons to the Lyran scientists. He wanted to tell them of other things—the things of peace.

It was so futile now. For, it seemed, there would always be wars to destroy. Was there no solution, ever? He stared up at the unanswering stars. Wars there, too, probably. Hardony was right. Men were vermin.

No, Hardony was not right. For an answer existed somewhere. Not yet, perhaps. Far in the dim, unborn days of the future, in a land and a time not yet come, but it would come. He would not see it. Even after his long, long sleep, the cravings of conquest and death pulsed too strongly in man's blood. War had almost destroyed the world, but men had forgotten that. The sword was being drawn from its scabbard once more.

This time it would flame across an earth that lay unprotected against its edge.

"Science," Court said under his breath, bitterly. "So it's got to be used for war again. And this is the future!" His tone was heavy with disgust.

"War is a folly," a voice said. An enormously fat figure appeared from the gloom, waddling forward awkwardly. The gay colors of Farr's garments were hidden in the dusk, but Court could dimly distinguish his gross face and body.

"War is folly," Farr repeated. "But I never argue with folly. The Throne rules, and let her rule, I say, so long as I'm permitted to live my own life. But I'm not. They won't let me have the equipment I need for my happiness."

Court turned away, but the fat man dodged in front of him. "Please wait." His high-pitched voice was thin with anxiety. "You can do me a great favor. Irelle would grant you anything, and it isn't much I ask. But it means a great deal to me. Don't go; listen to me for a moment."

"Well, what is it?" Court said ungraciously. He was annoyed at the intrusion.

"Surely a man's entitled to happiness, if he interferes with no one?" Farr said. "I need a little more equipment, and they tell me it's needed elsewhere. But a few power-sources and dynars won't make any difference to Lyra. You'll find me a valuable friend, Court, and I'm asking such a small favor. A word in Irelle's ear would serve the purpose."

"Settle it yourself," Court growled. He swung back. "What do you need special equipment for, anyway?"

"To be happy," Farr said. "I weave dreams."

"What?"

"I weave dreams," the fat man repeated. "Science can be turned to other ends than war. Years ago I retired to my castle and made my own worlds. There I can do as I please. I have certain—sciences." He hesitated. "Not that I'm a scientist. I'm an artist."

"Yeah?" Court said. "I thought I was one myself, a long time ago."

Farr smiled. "Then you can understand, I'm sure. In beauty and strangeness and—and new worlds, I forget the ugliness of this one. Science can give art life. If you could step into a picture you had painted, all would be well."

"If," Court said.

"But I can," Farr told him. "I paint with certain—forces, certain energies that can mould matter until it's real, to the artisan's eye. And more than that. It isn't static. It

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grows. It develops from its seeds of color and designs and sound, as a plant would grow."

"Do the technicians know about this?" Court asked doubtfully.

"Certainly. Some of them worked out the basic principles for me, as a worker would build a musical instrument. But I am the one who plays that instrument."

Court's skepticism fought against his interest. There might be a weapon here, some possible adaptation.

"How does this set-up work?" Court asked.

FARR took a black globe, the size of an orange, from his garments.

"Man is attracted by art-forms, which are the materialization of his subconscious self—his ego. He strives to create his personalized conception of pure thought. By transmuting them into color and form—and sound—the realities possible in this world. Even in your day, I imagine, men did that."

"They did," Court said. "Sometimes they succeeded pretty well."

"Only in art is perfection," Farr said. "That's because man can achieve absolute freedom. He is prisoned in his body and limited by his five senses. But his mind can stretch out in the infinity and conceive miracles. If he were not bound by the flesh, if the worlds his mind created were real—to him—there would be perfection. The prison walls would be down. Free mind, in a world self-conceived and self-realized. Here, now, is color." Farr's hairy finger traced a line over the black globe, and it became milky white. A slow whirl of color moved in its depths, reminiscent of a spiral nebula.

That gave place to pure abstract design, racing tints that dissolved and grew and darted out brilliantly as Court stared.

"This is incomplete, of course," Farr said. "It's a small device I carry with me for—for refreshment. In my castle I have more complete equipment. You will see why I need material that is refused me—and my need is more important than the building of a few more weapons. Here is color, Court—color that isn't entirely objective. It is a chameleon. It draws shading from your watching mind."

Tiny, glittering, fascinating, the miniature world of glowing rainbows—lived—in Farr's palm. Amber and shell-white, sapphire and angry scarlet, the colors raced. The designs formed and reformed. And in those colors was a hint of something utterly alien, yet familiar.

A curious rhythym, exciting as a Ravel piece, touched Court's nerves with its stimulus. Some mobiles, he remembered, had had a similar fascination to him in his own time. Now this one was nearly perfection.

Chips and facets of honey-gold spun off. Rays of ocean-green, peacock-blue blazed out. Clouds of velvet purple, almost tangible in their richness, bellowed. Ever the colors built and formed and danced. Ever the light and the rhythm moved like life within the little globe.

The colors died. The sphere went black.

"But now I can show you my real worlds, Court, of which that was a mere sample," Farr's voice said.

Court looked up, blinking. His eyes widened with incredulous amazement. For beyond Farr was not the green foliage of the terrace and the rose-pearl vista of Valyra, but the smooth, glass texture of a wall—the wall of a room.

He was no longer in the terrace. His startled survey told him that. He was in a room, bare and unfurnished, with a dim glow coming from the low ceiling.

"You are in a dungeon of my castle Court," Farr said, smiling. "It has been nearly five hours since you first looked into my colored ball. You are a long, long way from Valyra now, and not even Hardony will suspect fat, foolish Farr of holding you a prisoner."

CHAPTER VII

Sinister Dream World

COURT started forward, the muscles of his legs tensing. Farr shook his head.

"You can't touch me. You're looking at a projected image now. In the flesh—and a great deal of it there is—I'm many floors above you, in my castle. You, Court, are in a certain chamber I prepared for myself long ago."

But Farr's image, if an image it were, seemed tangibly real. Court reached out a tentative arm, and his hand passed through the fat man's body without resistance.

"You believe me now?" Farr asked. "That's a step in the right direction, anyway."

Court glanced behind him, saw a couch, and dropped upon it, watching Farr out of narrowed eyes.

"I'm a prisoner, then," he said. "Are you a Deccan?"

"Farr a Deccan? Fat old Farr, who does nothing but sit in his castle and weave dreams? No, I'm a Lyran by birth. But by choice I'm a cosmopolitan of many worlds. None of them is real."

"Why did you bring me here?" Court's gaze examined the walls. There was no sign

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of a door in the smooth, unbroken surfaces.

"Because you interfered with my plans. It wasn't hard. My air-car was in the palace terrace, and no one could suspect Farr of kidnaping. I brought you here without trouble. Since I don't approve of killing, you'll stay here."

"Your plans," Court said. "For example?"

Farr's tiny eyes sparkled craftily. "Did you believe what I told you on the palace terrace? Peace at any price? No, Court, no!" And Farr's gross body seemed to grow taller and harder. "Once I thought so, in the days when I built this castle for my pleasure. It was enough, then, to live in dreams. But I saw a shadow darkening over Lyra, and it darkened even my dreams."

"Well?"

"If war comes, Lyra must be prepared for it. I know that. But I also know something else. The danger is not from Decca. I have certain sources of knowledge. There is an enemy within, and if you build weapons, Court, you will be supplying that enemy."

"Who?"

"It does not matter, since there will be no weapons made," Farr said.

COURT glanced bitterly at Farr. "Fine. When the Deccans come over, you'll be in a swell fix."

"They won't."

"They have weapons."

"Do they?" Farr said cryptically. "Well, I know the value of preparedness, and I promise you that if Decca ever plans invasion, you'll be wakened from your sleep and then you can build your weapons. There'll be a need for them then, and they won't be turned to the advantage of a traitor who wants only power and conquest. That, Court, is why I brought you here. You're in a secret cell, far under my castle, and I have the only key. You will need no food or water because there is energy in the light that you see. You will exist for years in that room, grow old, and die there. But you will not be unhappy, for you will have worlds to live in far lovelier than any on Earth."

Court's throat felt dry. "I think you're insane, Farr," he said.

The fat man chuckled. "That's a matter of viewpoint. A madman's worlds may be a great deal more satisfying than one he did not create himself. You, Court, will have the opportunity of being a creator."

"Maybe."

"You cannot help yourself. The energy will draw from your mind, and build—pictures—that will live. Pictures in which you will live. You'll be happy. You can forget Lyra and the Throne and such folly. They will not matter."

"I'll—"

"You cannot reach me. I'm doing you a great favor,—letting you share such dreams as only one man has ever had before. So farewell." The figure of Farr grew misty. The small eyes blinked at Court. "Ah—a word of advice. Lie on the couch. You'll find it softer than the floor."

Court said something profane. But Farr was gone; the bare walls threw back the light, starkly. Light that—the fat man had said—would be food and drink to the prisoner.

The devil with that!

Court stood up, his mouth tight, his fingers working. He took a step forward, a grin of sheer fury twisting his face. To get his hands on Farr's gross throat would be a pleasure.

He took a deep breath. There was nothing to be accomplished by beating his head against the walls, much as he felt inclined to do so. He examined those walls, foot by foot, finding no trace of any jointure. The door was well-concealed.

He was drowsy!

Panic gripped him. He shook his head, savagely, blinking, fighting down the sleep, that seemed to pour like warm golden sand from the hidden lights overhead. He began to walk back and forth, jolting steps that assumed a definite rhythm.

Back and forth, back and forth. He was still awake.

He was sitting on the couch, sinking back!

He sprang up, but his legs could not support him. He was thigh-deep in the warm sand that shifted and moved slowly around him, sending him swaying back to a reclining position on the couch. Blood dripped from Court's lips as his teeth clamped down. The momentary agony rose to a pitch beyond pain, transmuted into a keen pleasure. . . .

He sank back.

Beneath him the solidness of the couch seemed to give way. The sliding golden sands buried him. He dropped down, through a glowing sheen of warm light, while the surrounding curtains of sand changed into a pattern of ferns—fronds—frost-crystals—

He was standing in a forest of glass.

The air held a clarity that was like a picture of Rousseau, and like Rousseau's work, too, were the vivid plants that surrounded him. They were ferns, intricate and patterned, and they were of pure, transparent crystal.

He touched a glittering frond, and it dazzled into vibration. And it sang.

PIZZICATO the high tinkle of crystaline notes rang out. Through the glass forest the music whispered.

And the forest replied.

In a million tones, pure as light itself, the forest rustled and shook into blazing move-

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ment. The sound thrilled through Court's flesh. He was a part of the bright jungle, vibrating with it—

Something touched his feet, warm and gentle. He looked down. From nowhere a blue, liquid pool was flowing, rising like the tears of Niobe about him.

He remembered—the blue sea! The blue sea that had cradled him during his long voyage through time!

Once before he had fought free of that hypnotic azure deep, and now its touch roused anger and terror within him. The blue stillness that had once meant peace now meant the oblivion of death to Court.

He lunged forward—crashed into the crystal forest.

It was fragile, that white wonderland. The intricate branches and fronds crackled and broke as he pushed through them. The crystal song was a discordance, a tinkling cry of protest. Beneath his feet gritty stuff crunched and crackled. A dazzle of whirlwind, a glassy motion spun before his eyes, pinwheeling into a blinding nebula of light and roaring sound—

It was gone.

There was gray void.

Something leaped into being in that enormous nothingness. A block, asymmetrical, oddly angled, bright yellow.

It grew.

It rose into a tower. Ochre protuberances sprang from it, monstrous growths like fungi. From its base a strip of amber unrolled like a carpet, racing to Court's feet.

Dots of light grew with enormous speed into rolling spheres, angry orange, shaded with pale gray. They spun into a goblin dance, receding, plunging forward, spinning into infiinite distances and returning.

Cubes and polyhedrons mounted jerkily like trees.

The amber carpet whipped back, carrying Court with it. He was drawn into the center of the devil-dance.

The abstracts toppled toward him, disintegrating as they fell. They vanished. Overhead a scarlet bowl flamed down like a falling sky, bellowing with enormous thunders.

A world self-conceived and self-realized.

Some distantly untouched part of Court thought, "I'm visualizing all this. It's been recessive in my brain. And Farr's diabolical machines are making it real to me."

It was horribly real, and most horrible was the exhilaration that rose within Court. He began to see meaning in the geometrical dance, began to perceive what lay behind the symbolism of abstract cubism that was animate and articulate. A yellow coil rose into a spiral, shrilling a high-pitched note that blended with the deep bass of a shapeless purple blotch that curved and writhed like an amoeba.

He felt himself moving in time with the—the things.

Yellow shrieked into red—red sang into orange—orange murmured into green. The humming chord that was an emerald triangle faded into blue—

Into blue that lapped and rose—beckoning—drawing him down into an abyss where there was no time. . . .

Into the blue sea of eternity!

He struck out at tower and angled globe, saw them give way and disintegrate beneath his blows. As they crashed down the blackness of infinity folded in from above, eating up color and sound.

He stood alone in the dark.

A dark that was unbroken—but not quite. He sensed, rather than saw, a variation of shades—of faint hints of shapes. . . .

Light came.

LUSHLY rich, flaming with tropical color, an Arabian Nights' jungle hemmed him in. A chain of suns was strung like a necklace across a sky more sensuously deep than any sky on earth. It was brighter than earthly forests was this jungle.

Flamboyant, it—flaunted. The deep green of great banners of leaves was veined with the purple blood of those plants. The flowers were cupped blossoms that might have grown in Solomon's gardens—brighter than color!

They were brighter than any artist could conceive, but they were not paint. Chalices of shining silver dripped liquid gold that foamed on the richness of the earth. A seed dropped here would sprout into pure wonder.

Behind the barred shadows of the trees—shadows deep and velvety—paced the sleek forms of tigers, yellow and black. Their eyes watched Court. Their bodies moved like sliding water through the blazing, shocking richness of that mad jungle.

A world self-conceived. . . .

He saw the first hint of blue water this time, and sprang away from it. The burnished shield of flower dipped down, pouring burning nectar upon him. Lovely feminine forms, white as snow, bent toward him. One had red-gold hair, a face of dazzling beauty. It was Irelle! . . .

The bright tigers faded like the phantoms they were. All but one. Court was astride it, feeling the smooth muscles bunch and ripple under his thighs as the great beast crouched and plunged upward.

Cold winds dried the sweat on his cheeks. One hand tight in a furry fold of skin, he flung up the other to guard his eyes from flames that lashed out at him.

He was riding through fire—riding on a steed that roared its excitement in deep tones

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of bell-like clarity. Like a huge gong the tiger's cry rang out, and Court, caught in the spell of racing motion and power, shouted too.

On they raced—and the blue sea loomed ahead.

Court leaped from of the tiger's back. He fell through whirling winds that slowed and were gone, leaving a chill barrenness—an empty gray world.

A grayness on which a broken line laboriously crawled and elongated.

Another line, thin, black, came to meet it.

A few others drifted by.

Nothing, now, but the grayness and the scatter of lines, meaningless, and yet—Court watched.

The purest essence of linear art, perhaps. A few lines, symbolic of rhythm and pattern—a pattern basic that artists may seek all their lives and never find.

For a long time Court stood motionless, watching the silent, unchanging scene.

The blue sea welled up again.

In the next vision there was neither color nor sound, nothing that any of Court's five senses could assimilate. Yet this was the strangest world of all, and the one that held Court longest. He knew it, with some curious inner vision of his mind, and the intoxication of swooping motion through space and time held him.

After that came other visions.

Free mind, in a world self-conceived!

In that ultimate vast freedom, unbound by the fetters of flesh, he sensed at last—something alive. It drew away from him, but he followed it.

He was no longer completely human. Yet the bonds that held him to his own earth were strong. The psychic forces that could prison a Lyran forever could not quite render Court helpless. He was of a different breed from the Lyrans, of a race that had always fought for survival, and perhaps, too, after his age-long sleep, there was a part of his mind that could not be touched now—something that the blue sea had never given up.

So, in that incredible space-time beyond life, he thrust out at the fleeing life.

He recognized it.

He knew—Farr.

Unimaginable meeting, in a plane of pure mentality! But the living part of Farr was there, and Court thrust out at it savagely.

Thrust out—and gripped it. Held it helpless— and bent it to his will.

Though it struggled, Court was the stronger. At last he knew he had succeeded. He fought free of the inconceivable cosmos that surrounded him, battled doggedly toward a warmth and a familiarity he sensed still existed. He could not fail—not now.

Fast! He must go fast!

Into the vortex he went spinning, down and down, faster and faster, smaller and smaller, diminishing from that cosmically unfettered mind into something small and limited and familiar. . . .

He dropped into a room with bare walls, a tiny room where a tiny figure lay, fettered by its pitifully few senses, leaving beyond him a greater glory than he had ever known before and which he would never know again.

And so Ethan Court awakened!

CHAPTER VIII

Traitor To His Trust

A DOOR was open in the wall, and on its threshold Farr stood, a metal key in his hand, life slowly coming back to his dulled eyes. He swayed forward and back like a dummy figure, shaking his head dazedly.

Court stood up, his knees watery. He staggered forward and wrenched the key from Farr's fingers, slipping it into his pocket.

That roused the fat man. He made no attempt to recover the key. Instead he stared at Court half-blindly.

"By the—by the gods! You're awake! What kind of a man are you?"

"I've been waiting to get my hand on your throat, Farr," Court said. But he made no move, waiting for strength to return to his muscles.

Farr touched his forehead gropingly. "I did not think such a thing was possible. You—you drew me from my dreams and made me open the door of your prison!"

"All right," Court said, "Hypnotism." He knew that was not the full answer.

"I don't understand. What did you do?"

"We were both dreaming," Court said. "And we met somewhere. Let it go at that."

Farr's fat body seemed to shrink. "I was a fool. I should not have gone into the dream-worlds where you could reach me. But how could I know the power of your will?"

"You couldn't. Which was lucky for me. And mighty unlucky for you, Farr." Court took a step forward.

"Wait!"

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Not long. A few hours." Court felt relief. He had thought his visions had lasted much longer—days or even weeks. He gripped Farr's soft forearm.

"We're going back to Valyra now, both of us. You as hostage. If any of your men try funny business, it'll be too bad for you. Valyra needs you now. I've got some ideas about these dream-creators of yours. It's

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just possible they could be adapted as weapons."

At that Farr tried to wrench free, his eyes widening.

"No, Court! No! I was foolish. I know that now. I should have told you the truth in the beginning, but I felt it would be impossible to convince you."

"What truth?"

"I have no choice. You must believe me, Court. You didn't know my motives for bringing you here."

"Well?"

"I wanted to stop you from building weapons, so much is true," Farr said. "But my reasons weren't selfish. I'm a leader of the Underground Group."

"Peace at any price, eh? Peace while the Deccans invade and conquer?"

"No! Decca wants peace, for reasons I can show you. Decca is not secretly arming. If it were, I'd have acted in an entirely different way. I'd have given you every assistance in weapon-making. But here's the truth, Court, something I've found out only after much espionage through my group. There is a man in Lyra who wants to seize control of the country, and then make war. He is the enemy. Decca really has no weapons. They can't conceive them any more than we can."

Court laughed harshly. "The devil they can't! Your story's too thin. A Deccan tried to kill me with a death-ray of some sort, so I happen to know you're lying."

"Tried to kill you? A death-ray?" Farr bit at his thick lips. "I've never heard of such a thing. That's folly. We of the Underground Group are in communication with Decca, and both the Deccans and our group are working for peace."

"You're easily duped. I think you're a liar, Farr."

DESPERATION showed on the fat man's heavy face. He hesitated. "Yet I'm forgetting. There's the treaty."

"What treaty?"

"Do you remember Tor Kassel?" Farr asked. "The physician who brought you back to life?"

"The man who was captured by the Deccans?"

"Yes. He's in my castle now. Will you talk to him, Court? I ask only that."

"So I can walk into another trap? No, thanks. We're leaving right now."

"But you ought to see him."

Court's fingers sank into Farr's arm. "Lead the way. If there's trouble, I'll break your back. I won't need any weapon for that."

Farr hesitated then let his shoulders sag hopelessly.

"Very well," he said. "But you're making a mistake."

"Just see that you don't make any," Court said. "Move!"

He kept his grip on Farr's arm as the other turned toward the door, stepped through into a tiny room, and pressed a stud on the wall. The chamber—an elevator—began to move swiftly upward. Presently it stopped. A panel opened.

Cool green light beat in on Court. He saw a shadow looming before him, the shadow of a gaunt short man with a gleaming bald head. He swung Farr before him.

"You can break my back if you like, but now you must talk to Tor Kassel," Farr said quietly. "He knows the truth, and you must learn that truth from him."

For a brief interval the tableau held, Kassel standing in mute inquiry before them, Court holding Farr in an immovable grip as a shield.

"All right, I'll listen," Court said. "But talk fast."

A few minutes later the three men were seated in a comfortable pneumatic chairs with a photostatic manuscript before them, a manuscript which Kassel had obtained from a secret hiding place in the wall. Court read it carefully. Then he scowlingly touched a signature with his finger.

"The Administrator of Decca signed the document, eh?"

"This is a true copy," Farr said. "The original was delivered to the Throne weeks ago."

"If the Throne got it," Kassel added. "It may have been intercepted."

Court shook his head. "I still don't understand. If Decca isn't planning invasion, what does all the excitement mean?"

"Decca never planned invasion," Farr said. "We of the Underground Group knew that, and we were in constant communication with Decca. It was through us that Decca learned of your resurrection. You were a menace—a man who knew how to build weapons. So Deccan spies were sent to kidnap you before that danger could be realized. They failed. They caught Tor Kassel instead."

"I've been in Decca for weeks," Kassel said. "I know a great deal now that I never guessed before. The Deccans are a peaceful race. They cannot build weapons any more than we can. Their minds were conditioned against it, as ours were, long ago. But they know of the militaristic movement in Lyra, and they have been trying to stem it. This treaty is the latest move, and it seems a useless one."

Court picked up the sheets. "It offers to open all Deccan laboratories, factories—all Decca—to Lyran visitors. Hm-m. 'Peace possible only through complete trust and understanding.... Such lowering of common

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barriers will help to prove to the most suspicious Lyran that Decca has no warlike intentions." He whistled between his teeth. "If this is on the level, it changes the setup a bit. Why is Lyra so convinced that Decca's going to invade?"

WITH a worried gesture, Farr leaned forward. "There is a man, a ruthless man without ideals or gentleness, a man who looks on the human race as vermin, created only to further his desire for power and conquest, who is responsible. You name him, Court."

"Hardony," Court said. "Yes, it would be Hardony. Not Den Barlen. He's honest."

"I suppose Hardony suppressed this treaty so the Throne did not see it," Kassel suggested. "I don't know what his plans are. Perhaps he intends to depose Irelle."

Court stood up. Farr watched him keenly.

"Wait," he said. "Let me tell what else we have pieced out. Hardony controls the secret espionage. A spy system is necessary sometimes. But it is like fire. If it gets too large, and out of control, it can destroy. Why is the secret service as large as Den Barlen's army?"

"I wonder," Court said. "Yes, that doesn't look well."

"Preparedness is necessary," the fat man went on. "But you forget one thing. Men of this time cannot build weapons. Why have no steps been taken to investigate Decca's intentions? Why has Lyra been practically cut off from Decca for so long? The answer's clear. Hardony has his immense spy system—with weapons. He'd make sure the weapons stayed in his hands. With it he could conquer a world. In your day that might have been inconceivable. But in this age there are no weapons. The man who brings them into being now has a certain responsibility. Now look. The gates of Decca are wide open for any Lyran to come through. Well, go through them. If you can find a single weapon in Decca, you'll know that I'm lying."

"There are easier ways of checking up." Court was scowling. Farr leaned forward.

"What do you mean?"

"I know a way to find out the truth," Court said. "If Hardony's behind this, if he's responsible for the wave of propaganda that's scaring Lyra into war, I'm going to get him."

"He's strong," Farr warned. "His Espionage Corps is powerful."

Court's eyes were narrow and deadly. He looked at Kassel.

"So the ability to create weapons has been bred out of the race! That doesn't help, Kassel! That doesn't help a bit and you know it. Nature's stamped out the effect but not the cause. The source is still here—hereditary desire for power and conquest. There'll always be people like that, maybe."

Kassel was silent, but Farr's fat face was suddenly ugly and malignant.

"And men will always rise to fight such killers," he growled. "Before you leave here, Court, answer me. Are you convinced? Do you intend to build weapons?"

"Not for Hardony," Court said. "No."

"Don't underestimate him," Kassel warned. "You can't return to Valyra, into his power, without taking some precautions. I'll go with you. My name carries weight, and perhaps I can assist you."

"I'm going alone. I don't trust either of you, completely. I want an air-car, Farr."

"But that's reckless."

"If you want me to trust you, give me an air-car."

The fat man nodded thoughtfully. "All right, Court. We'll do it that way, if you want. I advise you to be careful, that's all." He heaved his great bulk upright. "Follow me."

Leaving Kassel staring silently after them, they went through room after room, sparsely furnished, almost ascetic.

"My luxuries exist in dream-worlds," Farr murmured.

He pointed through an archway to a small chamber, the twin of the one far even below, where a heavy couch stood. Near it, on the wall, was a plain silver panel with two levers protruding.

"A movement of my hands and I create my private worlds, you see," Farr continued. "That lever has a timing-mechanism attached, so that I may awake again." He smiled half-maliciously. "The other lever has none, since it controls the guest-chamber beneath the castle. It's a place to which I could always retire, if I grew too tired of this world, and sleep forever—until I died—in my own universes. Here's the roof, Court, and here's the air-car. You know how to handle it?"

COURT nodded, and stepped over the low side and tested the gear. It vibrated into life against his hand. "Which way is Valyra?"

"Due north. Good luck. I may see you sooner than you expect."

But Court did not hear. The air-car rose into the night, leaving the figure of Farr, on the castle roof, below. The dark structure dwindled. A black wilderness, without landmarks lay below. Above him, only the stars blazed.

Court looked at the compass and turned north, speeding into full acceleration. Wind cut against his cheeks, cold and chilling. But it could not cool the dull, smouldering blaze

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that burned within—the question of who had lied, and who had spoken truth.

The more he considered the possibilities, the more he was convinced of Hardony's duplicity. It would have been easy for the espionage chief subtly to deluge Lyra with propaganda aimed at war. Irelle trusted Hardony, and, though Barlen did not, Barlen could do nothing, especially since he actually did not suspect treason. All this, of course, was on the assumption that Farr hadn't lied. The treaty might have been forged. Tor Kassel? Court had no real reason to trust the physician, either.

Yet, remembering Hardony's cold smile, his utter, ruthless contempt for mankind, Court felt a conviction that the red fox was the enemy to be faced.

But, if so, how could Court convince the Throne? Would Hardony have left any evidence to be found? Not likely.

An hour passed, and another. Court was no nearer a solution when he saw the dim glow of Valyra on the horizon. It was long past midnight, but the rose-and-pearl city still glimmered, with light undarkened. It was never night in Valyra.

But Valyra, for the most part, slept. Even Den Barlen was asleep, as Court found when he reached the officer's home. The guard recognized him immediately, and, saluting, took him into an ante-room where, after a few moments, Barlen appeared, clad in a sleeping-robe.

The giant's yellow beard was tousled.

"Court!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been? My men have been scouring the city for you. All the country, for that matter. Are you all right?"

Court glanced at the guard. "May I talk to you alone, Barlen?"

"What? Oh—yes, of course. Come in here." He pulled Court into his bed-chamber. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Court said slowly, choosing his words. "The only thing I do feel certain of is that you're a loyal man, Barlen."

The giant looked at him queerly.

"What is it?" he asked in a changed voice.

Court drew out the copy of the Deccan treaty. "Have you ever seen this before?"

Barlen's brows grew together as he read. "Signed by the Administrator of Decca. Odd. No, this is new to me. Where'd you get it?"

"I don't want to tell you that yet. It came from someone who's in close touch with Decca, though. There are a few other things to tell you." Hastily Court sketched his theories. Barlen listened for a while, but presently waved an impatient hand.

"Keep talking. I'll get dressed. This may need immediate action."

Court had a momentary cold fear. Suppose Barlen, not Hardony, was the traitor? Had he come to the wrong man?

Barlen's oath reassured him. "There'll be no proof where we can get our hands on it. But it sounds like Hardony. It's a staggering thought, that Decca has no weapons!"

"They have that death-ray."

"Well, I don't know. But all this is quite possible, Court. Hardony may be planning a coup. He could have seen that the Deccan treaty never reached the Throne. He's been trying to have my organization cut down, and his own built up. Yes, he could very easily be planning to start this war, conquer Decca—and then assume total rule himself."

THAT might be true. It was a puzzling problem.

"But how can we find out?" Court asked. "How can we be sure?"

"There's one way." Barlen hesitated. "Decca certainly has sent spies into Lyra, though I'm not sure, now, that their reasons were militaristic. We've captured a few. They're in Hardony's headquarters. They'll probably be able to tell us something about Decca's plans."

"If they will."

"They will," Barlen said grimly. He threw a cape over his shoulders, buckled on a sword, and strode to the door. "But we'll have to move fast, before Hardony's notified we're invading his headquarters." The giant's voice bellowed through the halls. By the time he and Barlen had reached the outer portal, a dozen soldiers, armed and ready, were running in their trail. Steel clashing, they swung out into the night.

Air-cars whisked the group across the city, to a silent dark building that was Hardony's stronghold. He was not there now, as Barlen had anticipated, but the red-uniformed Espionage Corps agent at the gateway said a pass would be necessary before he could let them enter. Hardony could be notified.

"Do you know who I am?" Barlen roared.

The guard bowed. "Den Barlen. I know you, of course. But I am a Corps man."

"You serve the Throne," Barlen snapped. "So do I! I'll put a foot of steel through that shiny uniform if you talk back to me! Where are the Deccan prisoners?"

"Den Barlen, I can't permit you to interfere."

Barlen gestured. Two of his men sprang forward and seized the Corps man. Another soldier put a knife to the agent's throat.

"Will you take us to the prisoners?" Barlen asked gently.

The agent, it seemed, now was willing. Massaging his neck, he silently led the way, with furtive glances at his captors. But two guards flanked him as he walked.

At a branch of the corridor the Corps man turned left. One of Barlen's soldiers pulled

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at Barlen's sleeve.

"This isn't the way, Den Barlen," the soldier whispered. "I've heard Corps agents talking. When they speak of taking the left turn at the entrance, that means they're going to Hardony's office."

"All right," Barlen said. "Kill that man."

The agent let out a gasping cry. "No! Don't!" He thrust out a clawing hand. "I'll take you to the prisoners! I swear it!"

"Very well." Barlen nodded. "Keep your sword-point in his back and, if there's trouble, push. Now, my friend. The right turn, I think you said?"

Now they walked through the halls in silence, save for the soft tread of wary feet. They descended a spiral ramp, turned again into a narrow corridor and, rounding a corner, emerged into a well-lighted chamber where four agents were playing an intricate card-game. The quartet stared, then sprang to their feet. But swords were at their necks. They dropped their hands and stood motionless.

"Another trick?" Barlen asked.

"No, no! I did not know these men were here! I swear it."

"Barlen!" Court said.

The giant turned his head. "Well?"

"That man!" He pointed at one of the agents. "I know him. He's the Deccan spy who tried to kill me in the Green Tavern."

"What? A Deccan?"

"Yeah," Court said. "It's odd he's wearing Hardony's uniform, isn't it?"

Barlen's nostrils dilated. Disdaining to use his sword, he strode across the room, his great hand falling on the agent's shoulder. The man screamed as Barlen's muscular fingers tightened.

"Talk!" Barlen whispered, and death stared from his eyes. "Speak the truth or I'll crush your bones into splinters! Who are you? Hardony's man?"

Words spilled out. "Hardony gave me my orders. I obeyed him. I harmed no one. The weapon was a sham."

"The death-ray?" Court moved forward, his eyes widening. "But you killed two people with it. I saw them fall."

"They were in Hardony's pay," the man gasped, writhing. "A—ah—my shoulder. The—the weapon—it was harmless. It sends out a ray of light, nothing more. Since then I have hidden here, as Hardony commanded."

"A good way to convince me I should build weapons for Lyra," Court said. "And it worked. I saw a supposed Deccan kill ruthlessly with a death-ray. Yes, it worked—almost."

"We'll see the prisoners now," Barlen said. "The real Deccans." He was smiling wolfishly.

[*Turn page*]

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A quarter of an hour later Barlen's air-car again was skimming through the dark, Court beside the yellow-bearded giant. Beneath them, Valyra glowed in deceptive calm.

"I'm convinced," Barlen said. "And I'm acting. My men are ready for mobilization and they'll obey me. I'm ordering the arrest of Hardony and the imprisonment of his Corps leaders."

"The Throne?" Court asked.

"There's no time even to tell Irelle. Hardony will learn of our visit to his headquarters. We must strike before the red fox can move."

CHAPTER IX

Plotters At Bay

STANDING before the private-beam televisor in Barlen's home, Court watched while the orders went out. He was a spectator now, passive and waiting for—what? He did not know, but he sensed a growing tension in the air.

"Find Hardony! Arrest him for treason, by Den Barlen's orders, acting for the Throne. Arrest all Espionage Corps leaders. Action!"

To Barlen's well-trained army, in a thousand branch and district headquarters, the command was sent out. Barlen touched a switch, stood up, and nodded briefly at Court.

"Stay here. I'm going to Hardony's home. I'll get in touch with you."

"I'll go with you."

"No, stay here where you'll be safe. You know things you haven't told yet, and your evidence will be important. That means your life's important too. Stay here."

Without waiting for an answer Barlen strode out, leaving Court alone to chafe and wonder.

He did not have long to wait. Within ten minutes the televisor screen leaped into brilliant color. Irelle's blue eyes looked into Court's.

"Where is Barlen?" she demanded.

"Looking for Hardony," Court said. "He's arresting your red-head for treason."

"So it's true, then," Irelle said. "Barlen's jealousy has boiled over at last. Well, the orders are countermanded. You will remain where you are till my own men come for you."

"Barlen's jealousy?" Court stared at her. "Hardony's a traitor. Barlen's got proof. And I have too."

The red-gold crown of hair shook from side to side. "I don't believe that. Hardony is loyal. I'd stake my life on it."

"Then you'd lose your life. He's responsible for trying to start a war with Decca."

"Oh, you're mad," Irelle said. Her hand reached to break the connection.

Court spoke in time to stop her. "Wait, Irelle!"

She hesitated. "What?"

"You won't have to send your men for me. I'll come to you. Furthermore I'll bring with me proof, indisputable proof, that Hardony's planned to depose you and take your place."

A shade of doubt came into Irelle's blue eyes. "Proof? It cannot exist."

"Give me five minutes. If I can't convince you in that time, then act."

"I do not wish to wait."

"I'm coming to the palace," Court snapped, and clicked the televisor into darkness. He went out, finding a guard at the street entrance.

"Get me an air-car."

"You can't leave, Ethan Court."

"I'm ordered to report to the Throne," Court said. "Tell Hardony when he returns."

"The Throne—oh!" The man signaled. Soon an air-car slipped silently toward the ramp on which they stood.

"Shall I go with you, Ethan Court?"

Without troubling to answer, Court sent his vehicle lancing up. Against the black sky he saw the palace on the mountain, and headed for it. But the seconds seemed to drag past, lengthening into eternities, before he reached his destination. Even then, no answer had occurred to him. He had to stop Irelle from countermanding Barlen's orders. But how?

There was no proof, no tangible evidence, nothing that Hardony could not explain away. But after Barlen had struck, after his men had raided and captured vital places, there would, Court thought, be evidence enough. Hardony must not wiggle out of this trap.

So he hurried to Irelle in the great tower room under the transparent dome. In the dim light he saw a silver-gowned figure seated before a televisor, silent and motionless.

She turned. Her quiet voice dismissed Court's guide. As the door swung down, Irelle rose.

"I've waited," she said. "Your proof?"

COURT gave her the Deccan treaty. She held it under a shaft of pale light, studying it intently. After a time she looked up.

"Well?"

"Decca never intended to invade Lyra," Court said. "They have no weapons. Hardony built up the whole idea through propaganda."

She looked thoughtfully at the paper.

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"How do I know this treaty is a true document? That Decca sent it?"

"You didn't receive it," Court said. "Hardony kept you from seeing it. He wants a war, so he can get the power he'd never achieve in peace." Watching her averted enigmatic face, Court went on quickly, telling her what had happened—more than he had meant to tell.

When he had finished, he knew that he had failed. Irelle was silent.

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

"No. For Decca wants war, Court. So many things prove that. Only by being strong, by being able to resist, can Lyra survive."

Court groaned. Had his words meant nothing to her?

"They have no weapons!"

"So you say." Her voice was doubtful. "But even if they have none now, they may arm themselves later. Two nations can have peace only if each is strong."

"My race thought that," Court said grimly. "It didn't work. There must be a common trust and understanding—not the piling up of weapons on each side till there's an explosion."

She looked at him. "Are you a coward, Court?"

Presently he answered her. "Maybe. There are some things I'm afraid of. Shall I tell you what one of them is?"

He took her arm and led her to the curve of the wall. In the dim light the metal circlet on her brow sent out faint gleamings.

There was a cold, hard knot inside of Court. Looking down at the rosy jewel that was Valyra, he saw the fragile bridges and domes crashing into horror beneath the impact of bombs from the sky.

"There's your city, Irelle," he said. "It's afraid now, but it's still a good place. It has good people in it. But they can be turned into people who aren't—aren't nice at all. People who are afraid, and who hate, and who want to kill because they think that's the only salvation for them. Who can become too blindly stupid to realize that there's always a rebound. You can burn the cities of an enemy, but the enemy will come back. Maybe, after a while, you could ravage Decca, but unless you killed every Deccan, Lyra, in the end, would be destroyed too."

His voice was very low. "Men don't forget, Irelle. It's been a long time since there was war on earth, and you don't know much about it. You've got pretty pink cities and shiny uniforms and bright swords. Do you think war is a duel?"

She moved a step away from him. Court's hand on her arm tightened.

"They who take the sword, shall perish by the sword," he said. "There were races in my time who learned the penalty. It was my job to fight those races. I did fight them. Yes, I was a soldier, Irelle. That's glamorous, to you. For all you know about war is shiny uniforms and shiny swords. You don't know what weapons are."

Something cold and horrible crept into the room from the darkness where stood stars that had watched the earth for a long, long time. She might have been a marble statue for all the emotions she showed.

"You don't see real weapons coming," he said. "You can't dodge them. You hear a noise, and you drop in the mud, and maybe you fall on something that was a man, before it was torn apart, and before it began to rot. Then you wait. You're alone. You're all alone. It doesn't matter whether you're a hero or a coward, it doesn't matter whether you're the Throne of Lyra or a scared kid. For if a bomb's coming, you can't stop it. It doesn't fall only on battlefields. It doesn't fall on soldiers alone. Bombs can rain down on Valyra, Irelle, on civilians, right here! If a bomb misses you, or just tears a hole in your body, you can get over that. Afterward you want to kill the people who drop those bombs."

GENTLY Court swung Irelle to face him. "Do you wish me to make bombs for you to drop on Decca?"

Fear blazed in her eyes, purple now, and deep. For a second he held her there, and then, against the backdrop of the rose-pearl city, they came together. Irelle had said that she would never kiss Court again, but she had lied.

She was afraid, and she clung to him, for a little while. The moment did not last. Court knew it could not last. But a feeling of desperate futility rose in him as he heard a murmur and a sound of approaching footsteps, and knew he had not changed her.

Irelle drew away. She gestured. The great room grew lighter. Through the rising doorway came two figures, Hardony, red-hair ruffled, a twisted sneer on his face, and behind him, a sword pointed at Hardony's back, Barlen.

The door slipped down. "Stand still, red fox." Barlen growled. "Treason to the Throne needs the Throne's decision. I think it will be death." He nodded toward Irelle.

"Have you found evidence?" Court said quickly.

"I need no evidence to run my sword through this traitor's throat," Barlen snarled. "The Deccans have no weapons, and never had. Hardony planned to foment a war and become ruler. Can you deny that, red fox?"

Irelle moved forward to stand beside Hardony, who turned his head to meet her calm gaze.

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"Can you, Hardony?" she asked.

He was grinning. "Why should I, Irelle?" he asked. "All of it is true, but two things. I would have served you loyally and I would have made you ruler of a world."

"You hear him," Barlen said. "He'd have a war!"

Irelle smiled a little. "And you, a soldier, are a man of peace?"

"I fight for honor, not for gain," Barlen said.

Court saw the movement too late. Irelle had moved a few paces toward Barlen. Abruptly, without warning, her hand flickered up from the folds of her gown. A dagger caught the light's blaze. It's flashing gleam flicked down. The gleam was quenched in Barlen's back.

The giant snapped erect. He swung about to face Irelle, his countenance twisted with sudden amazement. The sword rattled from his grip.

He opened his lips but only blood came out.

He fell face down, and was still.

Irelle caught up the sword and swung it, hilt-first, into Hardony's waiting fingers. As Court sprang forward, the steel point darted up, poising, waiting, quivering with thirst.

"It isn't wise, Court," Hardony said.

"You killed him!" Court whispered, staring at Irelle. He still could not believe. He stood motionless now, frozen in the grip of surprise.

Irelle took Hardony's arm and drew him, step by step, across the room. Court followed, but the sword still pointed unwaveringly at his heart.

"Irelle," he said. "Wait."

"No."

"Why?"

Still guiding Hardony, she smiled with a queer, sly triumph. "Because I knew, Court. I knew all along what Hardony intended. That Deccan treaty—I suppressed that myself. Hardony was going to make me ruler of Decca, and ruler of the world in the end."

"You fool!" Court said.

"Perhaps. I know only that I must conquer. Conquer and rule. Even as a child, I dreamed of power. There were voices in my blood that whispered to me, that told me stories of past greatness and future triumphs. I must rule!" Now a relentless, terrible madness burned behind the white beauty of her face.

"Barlen's soldiers are outside that door, Irelle," Hardony said.

She glanced at him. "We're going the other way, by the terrace." She opened a panel in the transparent wall and guided Hardony through. "It will be wiser to have my own men around me, when Barlen is found. Though—" she nodded at Court "—though I will say that you killed him, and no one will doubt the Throne's word. As a prisoner, there may be ways of inducing you to build weapons for us."

COURT took another step forward. Irelle and Hardony were gone in the dark. With reckless haste he sprang to the gap in the wall and darted through. He was on a terrace. Beyond its wall he could see Valyra below.

He saw shadows, two forms moving swiftly, and a larger shape, a bulky ovoid that looked like an air-car.

There was an air-car on the terrace! Who, then, was near?

The shadows seemed to dance before him. He heard a faint, warning cry, and the running of hurried feet. As he sprinted forward, he glimpsed a tangle of struggling, dim forms. A wild exultation sprang into life within him. There was a chance now to save a nation!

He saw Hardony drive his sword straight through the body of someone. He saw the victim seize the sword's hilt in a desperate grip, keeping the weapon sheathed in his own body, and resist Hardony's furious tug.

Then Court had reached Hardony.

His fist thudded solidly into the red fox's face, shattering bone and bringing blood spurting from riven flesh. Hardony went staggering back, a thick yell rising in his throat. He recovered, came back, his eyes searching for the sword.

Irelle flung herself at Court, clawing, kicking, her hair a bright flame against the dark.

Court had no time. He had a job to do. He slammed a solid blow against her jaw, and heard her body fall. Then he turned on Hardony.

Hardony tried to dodge, to double back into the tower room, but Court was too quick. Court went in relentlessly, no expression on his face, no light in his steady eyes.

His hands found their goal—Hardony's throat.

Fists battered at his face. A leg hooked itself behind Court's and tripped him. But he did not loosen his grip when he fell. His fingers only closed the tighter.

Sudden panic filled the red fox. He tried to scream but could not. Frantically he attempted to wrench free.

"Court!" he wheezed. "Don't—don't!"

"You wanted war," Court said. "Well, this is war."

Finally Court let the body drop from his fingers. Already reaction was making him feel cold and sick. He went back to the man who had been run through by Hardony's sword.

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But the man was not yet dead. It was Farr. He looked up at Court, his fat face twisted in pain.

"Followed you," he gasped. "Thought—someway—I could help. Well—there was!" His chuckling laugh ended in a groan.

Farr's gross hand reached up and took Court's. The tiny eyes were steady and questioning.

"Court," he said. "Court. Can you save Lyra?"

"Yes," Court said. "There will be no weapons made. I'll tell the truth and the treaty with Decca will be signed."

"But—Irelle—will not sign?"

"There will be peace," Court said. "I promise you that."

Farr nodded contendedly—and died. . . .

* * *

She lay still and lovely on the couch in the tiny room beneath Farr's castle. Her silver gown had been arranged, and her unbound hair, cloudy as spun red gold, draped the pillow. On her brow the metal circlet of the Throne took the light and gave it back in a dull glitter.

Court looked down at her. His throat hurt.

"I suppose there'll always be people like you, Irelle," he said. "There's a madness in your blood. You can't be convinced. But you've got to be stopped. So Lyra will have a new ruler tomorrow. It won't be Ethan Court, but it'll be somebody who wants peace."

The long lashes did not stir on the ivory cheeks. Court dug his nails into his palms.

"Can you hear me, Irelle?" he said softly. "You're going into your own worlds now. You can dream whatever dreams you want, and they'll be true. But you won't be able to hurt anybody now. You'll never waken from your dreams. I must make sure of that. No, you'll never waken. Forty years from now, fifty, maybe, I'll come down here and look at you, and you won't know I'm here. You'll grow old and die some time, but you won't know that. Irelle—my darling!"

ETHAN COURT bent and touched his lips, for the last time, to the soft crimson ones of the sleeping girl.

"I should have killed you, Irelle," he whispered. "But this death is easier for you. I wonder if you ever knew that I loved you?"

Her blue eyes were veiled. Court turned and went out of the room, staggering as he walked like a drunken man. He closed the heavy door and locked it with Farr's key. He pressed his forehead against the cool metal.

There was so much to do now, so much to do, lest all that had been gained be lost for want of a man who would speak the truth freely. But the road ahead was clear, and peace, not war, lay it its end.

The elevator lifted Court steadily toward a world of life and promise. Beneath him, in a bare little room of Farr's castle, Irelle lay in the sleep from which she would not wake again. He left her nothing . . . except dreams!

"Go Back to Earth, Young Man—You're Star Sick!"

LAIRD CARLIN was in a raging fury when the psychotherapist delivered himself of this edict.

"What do you mean, star sick?" Carlin flared. "I've made the trip to Algol ten times in the last three months. I've spent my leaves in Sun City with—Nila. Why should I join a bunch of bird-brained tourists headed for the other side of the galaxy?"

"You must," said the psychotherapist. "You've been overdoing things. You've spent fifty percent of your time for the last eight years in star ships. That's too much time in space for any man. You've got to quit work—forget the new Algol line—and go back to our ancestral planet Earth. Where all our race came from. You've got to go there and stay for a year—or you won't last six months!"

Doctor's orders were doctor's orders—and so Laird Carlin obeyed them, despite his repugnance. And what happens when he travels to Earth is told in FORGOTTEN WORLD, by Edmond Hamilton—a brilliant fantastic novel that will hold you spellbound. It's in our next issue!

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SPACE TRAP

By POLTON CROSS

When his space travelers revert to apes and his lovely fiancee vanishes, Ken Richmond grimly buckles on his ray gun and goes forth to break up an alarming conspiracy!

CHAPTER I

Space Pocket

IN the controlling office, Aero-dynamics deparment, of the United Nations Government Building, Ken Richmond sat watching the antics of a small spaceship zigzagging down from the heights. It was night, and the floodlights were on. Yet they did not obliterate the glare of sparks, firing haphazardly. From the wild curves the machine was making, it was obviously being guided by inexperienced hands.

Ken Richmond was Chief Dispatcher for the Government. The whole business was queer because Ken Richmond, in his official capacity, never permitted inexpert astronauts to fly Federal machines. Of late he had been especially watchful of this because of the secret enmity of Reekah Lothar, Martian representative who had the adjoining field.

As the space ship finally dropped awkwardly on the distant grounds, Ken Richmond frowned. He turned and snapped on a switch, getting direct contact with the grounds of the United Nations.

"Find out what's wrong with that ship which just got in," he ordered. "The pilot must have cismicosis or something."

Within ten minutes the answer came—an excited one.

"Chief, get down here quick! It's ship Forty-seven-C, one-man flier, Scientist Mason Hall. He left in it three days ago. Now he's turned into an ape."

Ken Richmond let out a yelp. "Turned into what?"

"Come and look. It's incredible."

Hurrying to the roof, Ken jumped into a low level glider and pushed the catapult button. The powerful spring hurled his glider aloft and a few minutes later he disembarked on the United Nations space grounds. Elbowing through a swarming mass of people, he soon reached a place which already had been roped off.

He caught the Airport Manager by the arm. "Well, where is it?"

"This way." The manager moved to the open airlock of the ship. Ken's gray eyes widened in amazement. There, sprawled in the leather driving seat was an ape in a lounge suit. It was playing with the switches, breathing noisily and baring its fighting fangs. One of its wrists had been handcuffed to an upright stanchion.

"It's Mason Hall himself, all right," the Manager said. "Somehow he's reverted to an ape. First we padlocked him. Then we checked up. Those are Hall's clothes and Hall's papers are in the pockets. He's wearing Hall's signet ring. It's the devil!"

KEN withdrew his head. "You're telling me!" He scowled.

"The people are alarmed over this, Mr. Richmond." The Manager's voice was glum. "When a man sets out for Venus and returns ina few days, changed into an ape, it's enough to cause a panic."

"Shut up and let me think!" Ken snapped. He gestured. "Keep the cordon around the ship and calm the people down. I'll get to the bottom of this somehow. It's probably just another one of Lothar's plots. He's a scientist-inventor, you know, and pretty much of a phony at that. He'd like to get the Government to use his new type of space ship. But I never have thought it was much good."

As Ken turned away, he overheard a remark of one of the spectators.

"Reekah Lothar always has said the spaceways were dangerous without his patented shield. It looks as if the Martian was right."

Ken paused. This was the very type of propaganda which he didn't want spread around. It was Ken's business, as Government Dispatcher, to promote better under-

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"Betty!" Ken Richmond cried, starting toward her, but Lothar stopped him with a leveled ray gun

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standing between the people of all the planets. The scientist of Venus had donated to Earth some valuable discoveries. Unrestricted travel between the planets was of paramount importance.

Lothar was not only trying to promote his own space ship. He was after Ken's job, too.

Now Ken watched with worried eyes as dozens of potential travelers lost all interest in going to Venus and began to file out through the gates of the field toward their various homes. Soon there wouldn't be a space ship leaving and Ken's record would be ruined. That was what Lothar wanted. If Ken Richmond lost his job, Lothar would be able to pull some strings and have himself appointed in Ken's place. Then it would be only a matter of time when the space ship of the Lothar design would be adopted and become the standard type of conveyance.

"Is Lothar going to gloat over this!" he muttered. "He's been itching for a chance to ruin me."

Furious at this mysterious development he hurried back to his office. Here he found the lanky, habitually placid Cliff Bomont waiting for him. Bomont was a physicist, the scientific end of the Federal Department. Right now he was stroking his big forehead in a troubled manner.

"What's this nonsense about a gorilla?" he demanded. "Is it a new trick hatched by Lothar and his mob?"

"No, it's the truth," Ken answered. He told what had occurred. Cliff was silent for a while.

"Sounds crazy to me," he said finally. "Space is tested, proven and tried. Superficially it resembles atavism—such as used to happen before they made the Kresler Chart of Space. But not today. Why, space is perfectly safe now. Are you seriously trying to tell me that that ape is really Mason Hall? If so, how could he drive a space ship back to Earth?"

Perplexed, Ken rubbed his dark head. "How the devil can I explain it? The ship was flying badly when it came down. It would, with that thing at the controls. Look here, Cliff!" He thumped the desk. "There's an atavistic radiation at work somewhere at some point and our Space Lane must go right through it. Mason Hall got the works, atavized, and came back with what intelligence he had left. That's the only explanation. We've got to locate the fault quick. Hop to the observatory and see what you can find out."

"Okay. Mebbe I'd better."

Cliff hurried out. Ken turned to the window and scanned the starry sky. Nothing wrong up there, so far as he could see. Throwing a scare into his connection of regular travelers would undermine fifteen years of grueling work and force him to resign from his Government post. That was a horrible thought. Reekah Lothar wanted the appointment so badly his tongue was hanging out. Not for the salary either. He already was a wealthy man.

A signal buzzed. Ken switched on and waited.

"Private report from Serviceman Adams," intoned a voice.

"Sure—put him on!" Moodily Ken watched the visiplate. Presently it pictured the big, good-humored reckless face of "Flip" Adams, the ace of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

"Hi-ya, space bug!" he boomed. "Say, while working for the I.S.S., I learned a titbit which may interest you. Did you know Reekah Lothar is erecting a space ground ways in the Arctic?"

"In the Arctic?" Ken looked his bewilderment. "What for? It's a cold frozen region of ice floes. Why should he establish an experimental space port way up there?"

"Don't ask me, feller. But I thought it might interest you."

"Well—thanks," Ken said.

"Odd looking field," Adams went on. "Lothar's got a huge metal plate on floats, all lighted up in the Arctic night. There's a directional guide tower and everything."

Ken shrugged. "Lothar pulls so many tricks he gets me dizzy at times. Thanks a lot, Flip."

THE visiplate darkened. As Ken turned away, the door opened to admit a deputation of men and women. They came surging in. He recognized most of them—wealthy people, mostly, with interplanetary interests.

A man with a red face seemed to be the spokesman.

"Mr. Richmond, what's wrong with the Government route?" he demanded. "It's against the law for us not to use the directional beam because of those dangerous meteors, and yet that gorilla business looks mighty bad, too."

"Forget it." Ken forced, a smile. "Accidents do occur, now and again. Why should you get panicky over a solitary case of atavism? The route is quite safe."

"You're sure?"

Ken didn't even hesitate. "Definitely! The Assignment Office will detail ships for you right away. Thanks for your confidence, folks."

Talking excitedly, the people trailed out. One young woman was left behind—a slender blonde of perhaps twenty-five.

"Betty!" Ken exclaimed in delight, hurrying around the desk. "I never noticed you among that mob."

"I wasn't among it. I came in after them." The girl's face was serious. "What's the truth,

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Ken? You wouldn't try and fool your future wife, would you?"

"Never!" He caught her hands ardently. "You're intending to take a trip too, then?" He could not conceal his uneasiness.

"I must." She shrugged. "Mother and Dad are in Hotlands City, Venus. Mother's contracted hotlands fever and Dad sent for me." She betrayed anxiety. "Ken, you're not sure about the route. You're worried. You lied to those people."

"Yes—a little bit." Ken nodded. "What else could I do? A case such as Mason Hall's will never happen again, and I don't dare take time to investigate, because, under Regulations, a certain number of ships must leave every day or I'll be up on serious charges. If I lose my job, remember, our marriage is off, and we've waited so long for it, Betty dear. If I wasn't so certain there was no actual danger, I'd never have let the ships go. Lothar's just trying to scare all travelers away."

The girl smiled. "Yes, probably you did right. I guess my fears were silly. Anyway, I've got to start for Venus at once."

"Single-seater? Sure you don't want a pilot?"

"No. I'll use one of those spiffy triple-ejector buses."

Ken pressed a desk button. "Reserve a B-Twenty and equip!" He switched off and glanced at the girl again.

"Listen, Bet," he said. "While in space keep your eyes peeled and be prudent. If there's any hint of something atavistic, turn around and return immediately. Throw on the repeller shields. Lothar says they're inferior to his, but nevertheless no atavism rays can penetrate them. If you sense anything strange, don't wait. Come back."

"Correct." She smiled, but her gray eyes were grave. "I'll radio if anything happens. Wavelength thirty-Jo."

Ken kissed her gently, watched her hurry out. Again uneasiness stirred him. He inwardly cursed the duties which kept him chained to his post. He didn't dare leave now. The unscrupulous Lothar would ruin him.

In the next hour Ken found the faith of the people in his word was gratifying. He watched spaceship after spaceship hurtle up from the grounds and climb to the Government space beam. Soon he saw Betty Dransfield's B/20 follow and vanish amid the stars.

He switched on his space-radio to Betty's frequency.

"I hope to heaven I was right," he muttered, then he looked up as Cliff Bomont came, his big forehead dark with worry.

"You'd better give a stand-by order to the groundsmen, Ken," he said. "There's big trouble blocking the beam."

Ken jumped up in dismay. "But I've let a lot of ships go!"

"You've what?" Cliff Bomont's calm deserted him. He caught Ken's arm tightly. "Listen, Ken—that overconfidence of yours has gummed things up for fair. Right in our beam—about one-hundred-twenty-thousand miles from Earth—is a space-pocket. The reflectors show it as a black smudge. Similar 'sink holes' are the enigma of science. The Black Hole of Cygnus is one of them. Just pits of—of nothing."

FROWNING, Ken stared at Cliff.

"How does that make Mason Hall a gorilla?" he snapped.

"Plenty of ways. In such pockets anything can happen. As a rule those Holes form the entrance to an unknown universe, so it's queer that Mason Hall managed to return at all. He must have slipped several degrees backward in Time and become an ape. Ken, you've got to recall all the ships that have left. Then we can go out and take a look at this Hole ourselves."

Ken nodded and gave the order for recall through the broadcasting system. He looked again through the window at the stars.

"I can't understand it, Cliff! A sink-hole doesn't just—develop."

"It can." Cliff's main interest was on physics as usual. "With a grouping of space radiations in a state of fusion, you get primal space substance—Eddington figured that out long ago. And what happens? Space, matter, radiation, time, light—all such things cease to be as such. There's a piece of Nothing left. The whole thing is possible, but it's awkward to have it develop right in our space line. Nor can we steer round it, because of meteor danger. Even a small one can wreck a ship."

"And Lothar wins!" Ken's eyes flashed. "He's certainly got the right deck of cards this time."

He broke off as the space-radio came on. Betty Dransfield's face was mirrored in the plate. She looked surprised.

"What's the idea of the recall order?" she demanded.

"You've got to obey it, Betty!" Ken urged. "There's real peril ahead. A sink-hole! You know what that means."

"You mean that black spot I can see further on?"

"That's it! Turn back—immediately!"

"Not immediately," she answered. "First I'm going to take a look at it. Don't worry about me, Ken. I'm not alone. Two other ships have ignored the recall order and are flying right beside me. If they can risk it, so can I. I'll tell you what I find out."

"Betty!" Ken insisted. "For heavens sake, do as I ask!"

Her answer was a solemn wink. Then she

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cut off. Ken glared wildly at Cliff.

"She's taking an awful chance," Cliff sighed. "Radiations from that hole can be mighty treacherous. There may be a central magnetic vortex which will drag ships into it."

"What can we do?" Ken asked desperately. "We can't overtake her now. She's too obstinate to listen."

"Trust to luck!" Cliff waved his hands. "Maybe she'll come through."

CHAPTER II

Atavism Increases

THE opening of the office door made both men turn. A big man came in. He was big in every way, like an ox. His neck flowed over the edge of his collar, and his red face hung in folds. His paws were hairy and swollen with good food. He was about six feet, proportionately broad, and massive-stomached. Across it stretched a solid gold watch chain with a black jewel dangling from the center.

"Thought I'd find you in," he said in a heavy voice. Then as he took off his hat, the expanse of head revealed where the intelligence lay. What remained of his gray hair was clipped to the closeness of plush.

"What's the idea, Lothar?" Ken demanded. "You know you're not welcome here."

A smile twisted the big man's lips. He focused his cold blue eyes on Ken's taut face.

"I'll overlook your rudeness," he answered. "I suppose you are feeling the drag, eh? The space service is all messed up. Poor management. Atavism traits. That's bad."

He stood there, slowly twirling the black jewel on his watchchain. As Cliff Bomont watched that action, a vague interest began to kindle his eyes.

"What do you want, Lothar?" Ken demanded.

The Martian was calm. "You ought to know by this time. I've been telling you long enough. I want the Government to adopt my new space ship. It's of better design and has superior shields. They're safe. No atavism rays would ever get through the safeguards of the Lothar Whippets."

Ken Richmond restrained his irritation. "That's bunk, Lothar," he said. "Your ships aren't as fast as the present ones we're using and they're much harder to control. They're so complicated, too, that they constantly get out of order. They'd be in the work-shops half of the time."

Lothar waved his big paws. "Bah!" he snarled. "You're prejudiced. You never wanted to give my buses a fair trial. The Government needs a new Dispatcher."

"It wasn't my opinion," Ken answered steadily. "What you object to was the considered opinion of Investigating Committee of Scientists who thoroughly tested your machines over a period of months under every possible condition. If you don't like the report, talk to them."

Lothar's face turned purple. "I won't stand for it!" he roared. "You can't fool me. You're the one who's to blame. The Government needs a new Dispatcher. You're in a spot. The whole city is talking about that black hole blocking the beam and you're incompetent to handle the situation. Sink-holes have a habit of sticking—and the longer this one sticks, the worse off you'll be. Why don't you resign?"

"You're wasting your time," Ken said. "Just because there's been a cosmic accident, doesn't mean the situation is hopeless. I'll use science, astronomy—everything—to crack this hole. You'd like to liquidate me just as you liquidated Conroy, Shelton, Ob Thursor and that Jupiterian researcher, Brak. You'd like to become Dispatcher yourself because you think you'd have everything your own way. But it won't work, Lothar!"

Lothar's face twitched. He was about to speak again when the space-radio came on. His cold eyes flashed to the plate as Betty Dransfield's face mirrored again.

"I'm still traveling, Ken!" she said eagerly. "That black hole is quite large now. At the present speed I'll reach it in about twenty minutes. Hello! Is that Mr. Lothar there with you?"

"Right." Ken spoke coldly. "Keep right on talking."

"This Hole is just like a circle," the girl resumed. "It's blacker than space itself—totally devoid of all signs of light. Inside it there seems to be just nothing—not a ray, not a trace of luminous radiation—plain nothing. There's something queer about it, somehow. Reminds me of the blackest tunnel ever conceived."

"Betty, for the love of Pete come back!" Ken cried. "If you go too far towards that sink-hole you're a goner. Turn around! You hear me?"

"Not while these other two ships fly with me," she answered. "I'm no quitter. Gosh, I'm beginning to feel something," she went on, wonderingly. "Yes! Like cramp! A pricking sensation."

She stopped speaking and the three men watched the plate fixedly as an astounded expression came to her face. She seemed about to scream, but no sound came forth. Simultaneously the visiplate went blank. The communication had been sheared off clean.

"She's—she's gone!" Ken gasped. "Some-

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thing out of that Hole cut the contact."

"And you still think you oughtn't to resign?" Lothar asked dryly.

"You've had my answer!" Ken roared, wheeling on him. "Get out of here, Lothar, before I kick you through the door."

LOTHAR shrugged. "You're welcome to try. Do that, and I'll make this town hotter than a grill for you. Whether I do so or not depends on whether you see reason."

"I don't scare easy," Ken retorted. "Now beat it!"

The big man hesitated, then released his hold on his watchchain fob and picked up his hat. At the door he looked back, spoke slowly.

"Richmond, I'll break you. No cheap, narrow-minded Federal flunkey is going to stop me. Better think twice."

Ken watched the door close, then turned to Cliff Bomont.

"We're leaving," he announced in sharp tones. "We are heading for that Hole right now. Come on."

Cliff caught his arm. "Wait a minute, Ken! Think what you're doing. If you head into space, that's just what Lothar is waiting for. He'll see to it that you never come back. He can spread the tale that you met your death in the sink-hole. Then what? He'll have your job in no time. Think man! Think!"

"Right now I don't give a hang for Lothar." Ken clenched his fists. "Betty's in deadly danger. She has just been scooped into that blasted Hole."

"We don't know that for certain," the physicist insisted. "The stoppage of communication doesn't prove it. Radiations from that spacial quirk might have swamped all radio-waves. You can't leave, Ken. You'll play right into your enemy's hands. Doubtless Lothar came here to goad you into that very act."

"What can I do?" Ken's eyes were glittering. "Just sit around here and let things drop to pieces? Let Betty die so that I can keep an eye on Lothar? For what? I'll lose the Service anyway, from the way things are going."

"We'll figure something. At the moment I'm interested in a closer inspection of that ape. I don't see how any man atavized that far could ever have driven a spaceship. Let's take a look."

The lanky physicist was insistent. Together they took gliders to the space grounds, crossed the depressingly quiet stretch of tarmac. Most of the ships were grounded, unwanted. But over on the adjoining grounds of Lothar, men were testing out the Lothar "Whippets."

"Okay," Ken said briefly to the men guarding the ship. "Let's have a closer look at that ship, boys."

As he spoke, he was moving towards the ship with Cliff beside him. At that same moment with terrific and totally unexpected violence, the spaceship exploded. Force and heat rolled across the intervening stretch, sending the men reeling backwards to crash into the hard fusilage of the next nearest spaceship.

That was all Ken remembered. . . .

Ken had a dim idea for a long time afterwards that he was dreaming. It was an odd dream, too, shot through with lifelike visions of silent people in white. The only sounds were the clink of instruments. Then out of the half formed patchwork he began to drift back to realities, became quite rational, all of a sudden, and realized that Cliff Bomont's keen face was watching him earnestly.

"Good!" Bomont said in satisfaction. "You've pulled through it all right. Eh, Doc?"

"Definitely." A white-coated medico smiled. "And remember, Mr. Bomont, not too long."

"What happened?" Ken muttered, too dizzy to stir.

"Delayed action time bomb blew the spaceship to bits," Cliff Bomont answered bitterly. "I escaped with cuts but you got concussion and three cracked ribs. You've been delirious. But you'll soon be okay again now."

Ken breathed more rapidly. "How long have I been unconscious? What about Betty?"

"Take it easy," Cliff insisted. "No excitement. You've been laid out for four days, and in that time things have happened—grim things! You'd better hear about them though." His voice slowed a little. "The B-Twenty came back along with those other two ships, only—"

"Apes were inside?" Ken whispered in horror.

"You guessed it." Cliff nodded somberly.

KEN closed his eyes. "Betty coming back —that way!"

"A she-ape, dressed complete to her wristwatch."

"I could have saved her," Ken insisted, opening his eyes again. "I could have, I tell you, but for your stopping me."

"Wait a minute—I've more yet. Each of the ships which returned—the B-Twenty included—blew up just after we'd dragged the apes from inside them. That discounts the idea that Lothar knew somehow we were going to examine that first ship and planted a bomb ready for us. What I now believe is that time-bombs were put there to blow the ships up once they had disgorged their atavized inmates. The first bomb was badly timed, but the mechanism has been rectified since. Allows just interval enough for the

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ship to land and then—boom! Obviously done to prevent any thorough investigation of the ships' controls."

Ken lay puzzling. "That's reasonable."

"It's as I said at first," Cliff went on. "How could an ape drive a spaceship? Answer is—it couldn't! The ships were sent back to Earth by remote control, with bombs installed to blow up the works before we could find out. In other words somebody apparently is turning that sink-hole to account—is deliberately atavizing human beings for the sole purpose of discrediting you. Lothar is in it some place."

"But how could any man cash in so quickly on a cosmic accident?" Ken demanded.

"I don't know. Yet a man with the scientific ingenuity Lothar has, could do plenty. By some method or other he can produce atavism. Or else the sink-hole does it. Anyway he profits from it by sending ships back by remote control from some pirate headquarters in the void. Owning most of the spacelanes he could easily do that."

Weak as he was, Ken Richmond felt his anger rise.

"If that's so, I've got to get well in a hurry," he snapped. "As soon as I'm able to move around again, we'll go out and have a look at that 'sink-hole' ourselves." He gave Cliff Bomont a sharp glance. "But first we'll have to find some way to take Lothar along with us. I can't leave him behind to plot against us."

He stopped talking as a genial-faced giant in flying togs came into view, a bunch of magazines in his hand.

"Flip Adams!" Ken exclaimed, smiling. "Well, well! How's tricks?"

Adams grinned. "Came to ask you the same thing. "Getting along, eh? Good. Here's a few things to read, though I guess you won't feel much that way in view of what's happening to the route. Thought I'd drop in to give you some more news about that Arctic space ground of Lothar's. It may help you."

"Slipped my mind in the rush," Ken sighed.

"What Arctic space ground?" Cliff demanded. "Spill it, Flip."

The Serviceman told him and Cliff Bomont frowned thoughtfully.

"Where do you head next?" Ken inquired.

"Well, the chief detailed me to look into two puzzles. One is concerned with a lot of queer nursery rhymes that have been space-broadcast recently. They might be code. I've to track 'em down."

"When did they start?" Ken asked abruptly.

"About a month or so back. I don't remember exactly. The other assignment I'm on is to trace the whereabouts of one Clinton Drew, an inventor mixed up in metallurgy and things. He went to Pluto to do some research work and then mysteriously vanished. Always some person or other up to a dirty trick somewhere, I guess."

"Any suspicions?" Ken asked.

"Only personal ones—not official. Lothar maybe." Adams' big jaw squared. "That fellow's got intrigue splashed around in every part of the System. Some day I'm going to bump him where it hurts most." He rose to his feet. "Well, I'll—see you when you're on your pins again, Ken. 'By, Cliff."

He went away with vigorous strides.

CHAPTER III

Into the Black

AFTER Adams had gone, Ken Richmond turned to Cliff Bomont.

"Flip sure gets himself some queer assignments," he mused.

"Eh?" The physicist awoke from his abstraction. "Oh, sure he does. Y'know, I was just thinking about Clinton Drew. I recall that he went to Pluto to look into the extraordinary properties of Polarium-X, an isotope which forms part of Pluto's surface. If we could discover just exactly what Polarium-X is we might be half way to solving the mystery of this sink-hole."

"I heard it has something to do with light-polarization." Ken frowned. "Say, Cliff, maybe that's it!"

"Yes, it might fit in somewhere," Cliff Bomont said. "First we get an unusual space ground at the Arctic, with directional towers—where all the Earth's natural power can be utilized, remember. The space ground may be a disguise for a real motive, particularly since the ground itself is illumined, apparently from beneath. It could be energy in the metal facing itself. Second, we get nursery rhymes which form a code. They could be applicable to agents in the void—agents of Lothar. And lastly, an inventor, engaged in research with Polarium-X, vanishes. What is there about Polarium-X which necessitates the liquidation of the discoverer?"

"I'm more interested in getting to that sink-hole and learning what's wrong," Ken said, struggling to a sitting posture. "I've just got to find out. Then I'm going to avenge Betty and those others. I'll dedicate my life to it—so help me!" He sank back again, exhausted.

"You'll be here a week at least. Then you'll be all right. This is no cosmic accident, Ken. It's a deep laid plot."

"That's why Lothar will have to come along with us into space."

"He won't fall for it," Cliff Bomont objected. "He's sure to refuse, especially if he's

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been up to some trickery."

"Then he stands self-confessed as a plotter," Ken went on grimly. "I'll get him. I'll bluff him by suggesting I mean to resign."

"No!" Cliff was horrified. "Ken, you wouldn't do that?"

Ken smiled. "Not really. I'll fool him by offering to show him the route we'll take, all the private signals, everything. He wants to be Chief Dispatcher so much he's sure to agree."

"I hope you know what you're doing." Cliff Bomont got to his feet. "Well, Ken, you spend your time getting well while I have a look around. If I can't find something to pin on Lothar, I'll chase a comet."

By the time two weeks were up Ken was almost well again and chafing with impatience to be on the move. So he left the hospital, hurrying back to headquarters.

Here there was little to do. Space travel had dropped to zero, thanks to the "sink-hole." Through the observatory mirrors he scowled at that dark, sinister eye athwart the route. Bitterness, resentment, sorrow all raged through his brain at the thought of the dreadful fate of the girl he had loved. His anger at the factions at the back of it increased.

Where was Cliff Bomont? That worried Ken, too. He had not seen Cliff for some time. Ken had almost reached the point of starting a search when the physicist came into the office, tired and drawn.

"A long chase," he announced, pouring himself a drink. "I had to question a lot of Clinton Drew's research assistants. Now I know what Polarium-X is. It's an isotope and an absorbent metal. Drew made it synthetically at first and then found that it existed naturally on Pluto, created there by the battering effect of ceaseless radiations out of space."

"Which signifies?" Ken's voice was impatient.

"Lothar knew about it too," Cliff went on. "Records show Lothar went to Pluto, bought some ground, and established a research laboratory near Drew. Since then Drew has never been seen. Stated briefly, Lothar gained complete control of the entire mineral output of Polarium-X."

Ken Richmond nodded approval. "Good work, Cliff," he said.

BOMONT flushed with pleasure at the praise and finished his drink.

"The idea occurred to me when I watched Lothar fingering his watchchain that evening," the physicist went on. "Did you notice the stone on it? Nothing anywhere to resemble it. It wasn't carbon or hard platinum dust, the rare black diamond or agate. It was an unknown jewel. Lothar had that piece of hard mineral-like substance ground into a jewel by Latham's, the none too scrupulous jewelery experts downtown. And the jewel was—and is—Polarium-X. Now do you get the picture?"

Ken Richmond's face lighted up. He slapped his hand down on the top of the desk hard.

"Get it?" he cried. "You bet I do. I may even be a little ahead of you. I noticed that stone myself. It absorbed every bit of illumination as easily as a sponge soaks up water. It's not a far cry from a sink-hole in space and a jewel that won't reflect light. Possibly they are identical!" He stopped suddenly and stared at his chief physicist. "If the sink-hole's a phony, the atavism must be also."

Cliff Bomont nodded. "Exactly. That's what we've got to find out."

"I see something else, too," Ken cried. "A metal element that can absorb light, might possibly absorb other radiations. Such as the vital ones from the sun, for instance. If that happened, we might devolve in no time—go backward in evolution—become apes again. Why, an hour inside a globe of that stuff might turn anyone into an amoeba. It's fiendish!" Ken Richmond set his firm jaw. "Yes we must visit that sink-hole and investigate. And certainly we will take Lothar along with us. Wait!"

Reaching forward, he pressed the televisor switch on his desk. Lothar's ugly, flabby visage soon appeared on the screen.

"Lothar, I've thought things over," Ken said. "I've decided perhaps you were right about me resigning. I'm in a corner. There's no use fighting you any more."

Lothar bared his ugly teeth in a ferocious grin. "You'll have to sign a statement accepting responsibility for those people who were avatized. You sent out those ships, you know."

Cliff Bomont uttered a protesting cry but Ken Richmond silenced him with a gesture.

"All right, Lothar," Ken said. "Come to my office. We'll discuss the details."

Lothar grimaced. "It'll be a pleasure."

Tight-lipped, Ken lifted the switch, cutting the connection.

Within ten minutes Lothar arrived. As usual he threw down his hat and began to finger his watch-fob. Ken watched it, this time with fascination. Though the sunshine was full upon it, the gem remained a black mystery, almost like a hole burned in the man's puffy fingers and heavy body. It had a depthless, fathomless beauty all its own.

Ken caught himself just before suspicion had time to take root in the big man's brain.

"I'm taking your offer, Lothar, because there's nothing else I can do. It includes everything, of course."

"Naturally," Lothar retorted. "I had your statement and resignation prepared before I

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came here. Here it is. Sign it."

He threw down a sheet of stiff paper on the desk.

"Not yet," Ken said. "First, I think you ought to know just what you are getting. There are tricks in my job just as there are in yours."

Lothar sneered. "Generous of you to tell me. Why worry over that? I'll have my engineers find out all that's necessary."

"Engineers won't do," Ken said steadily. "It demands an expert scientist like yourself to appreciate what I want to show you. You'd better come along the course and see for yourself."

Lothar hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, if that's what you want. I'll 'phone my office."

He did so, then picked up his hat. "Hurry up," he snapped.

Inwardly somewhat dubious at this ready acquiescence, Ken led the way from the office to the roof gliders with Cliff beside him.

In a few minutes they were inside a three-passenger spaceship streaking swiftly into the sky. . . .

The black Hole, formerly blurred by atmosphere, was now quite clear. As Betty Dransfield had said, it looked just like a tunnel at the end of the space lane.

Lothar stood in the center of the cabin, with his massive legs straddled against the gravity pull, staring ahead.

"I have been checking up on that Hole," the Martian inventor said, while Cliff and Ken exchanged surprised glances. "I can tell you what it is even though the knowledge won't do you much good. It is an ether-warp, a point where the known universe ends and leaps the gap to the beginning."

"Meaning what?" Cliff Bomont asked sharply.

LOTHAR grinned contemptuously.

"You're a scientist, Bomont—you ought to know. Einstein's theory says that space is curved. In that case it must at some point return to its starting point. When that happens, there is a black nothing which represents the end of one course and the beginning of another. Naturally, anything inside that Hole will also shift back to its primal state. Hence man becomes ape and, if he stays long enough, amoeba. Later on, he might change into a pure radiation out of which he was originally born. The difficulty in such a Hole is to find the way out. Presumably there is a way because some have so far got back, although devolved."

"Clever theory," Ken Richmond observed. "Only it happens that your theory doesn't work this time. Scientifically, your explanation is right—only it does not apply to that Hole! That Hole is a trick, and Polarium-X has a good deal to do with it!"

Lothar appeared surprised. "Polarium-X?"

He frowned. Then, apparently understanding, he held up his watchchain jewel. "Oh, you mean this? Rather good, don't you think? Unique for a watchchain. Say, wait a minute! Are you suggesting that my watch jewel and that sink-hole are the same thing?"

"What do you think?" Ken asked him.

"You must be crazy," the inventor said. "That is a second Cygnus Hole, believe it or not. And the nearer we get to it the less I like it."

"We're going right into it, Lothar," Ken Richmond said. Why else do you suppose we brought you along? All of us are going into that Hole."

"But—but you said you only planned to show me some tricks?"

"There are no tricks," Ken answered, smiling tautly. "You are the only man who uses tricks. We're here to examine that Hole. If it is a phony and you want to avoid the fate of the others, you've got but one chance. Tell us everything and we'll turn back. If not, we go through."

"Now wait a minute!" Lothar protested. "I haven't anything to do with that Hole! I admit all about Polarium-X. I bought the secret from Clinton Drew on condition that he'd cease research work. I've an idea for making light-absorbing spaceships, invisible to space pirates. But that Hole is the door to the unknown. Only those who have come out of it really know what is inside it. You've got to believe that."

"Did those time bombs get into the spaceships all by themselves?" Cliff Bomont asked dryly.

Lothar swung to him. "I don't know anything about the time bombs. I swear it. Perhaps there is alien life in that Hole. They could have arranged time-explosives. You've got to turn back! Where's the sense in taking this risk?"

Ken shrugged. "Makes sense to me. Lothar, you are either a champion liar, or else circumstances have got you painted blacker than you are. Either way we're going to find out. Here goes!"

He put on speed and the Martian inventor stood with popping eyes as the immense maw of black began to loom nearer. He prattled again about infinity curves and Einstein, but Ken Richmond took no notice. He drove at top speed, only began to slow down when the black started to grow huge enough to blot out the stars.

Then came queer sensations, just as Betty Dransfield had described them—a feeling of tautness about the skin, a pricking on every exposed part. Ken felt as if his hair were standing on end.

"Radiation—of sorts," Cliff Bomont said.

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Then as he closed a repulsion shield round the vessel, the effect diminished.

"The more I look at this Hole the dizzier I get," Ken muttered. "Seems to be without proper dimensions—like nothing laid on top of nothing. No break in it, yet it's nothing but a Hole."

"Look here!" Lothar gripped Ken's arm savagely. "Why in blazes don't you two fools realize that these sensations are the beginning of avatism? We've go to turn back!"

Suddenly it was too late for his words to have meaning. Darkness—utter and complete—closed round the ship. In fact it was more than darkness. It was a solid, crushing barrier which lay on the eyes like invisible wadding.

"What the devil?" Ken's discomfited voice floated from the abyss.

HE FIDDLED with the switchboard lights, but nothing happened. Next he put on the searchlights, but no light came forth.

Then Cliff mumbled something and there came the scrape and splutter of a burning match. But no match flame could be seen! That it was there, all right, was evidenced by Cliff's gasp as the invisible flame scorched his fingers.

"Have we gone blind, or what," Ken yelled. "See if it's any better with the shield's off."

He rammed the switches and that tingling, inexplicable tautness of the flesh came back. But no lights.

"My stars!" whispered Cliff, horrified.

"You fools!" Lothar raved out of the dark. "You idiotic fools! You've flung us into devil knows what universe!"

"Oh, shut up," Ken retorted. "We'll figure something. I'm going to try and land somehow."

"In this?" Cliff gasped.

"Yes. Sense of touch. And Heaven help us if I miss!"

CHAPTER IV

Intrigue Defeated

KEN'S intention was forestalled, however. With abrupt and overwhelming violence the ship cannoned into something in the blackness, rebounded with dizzying force. All three men recoiled against the padded walls, then picked themselves up. They realized they had escaped with nothing worse than bruises.

"Landed somewhere, anyhow," Ken breathed. "Are we all here?"

Cliff and Lothar answered in shaky voices.

"If only something would light up," Ken muttered desperately. "I don't understand this setup at all. Hang on a minute. I'll see if there's air outside."

"Don't be an idiot," Cliff shouted. "If there's a vacuum out there, the air in here will be gone in a second."

"We can't stop here in the dark," Ken retorted. "We can't see our gauges. The only way is to trust to luck."

He felt his way round the wall to the airlock, spun the screws, then moved the door very gently back until he knew a thin crack must be present. He waited for the tell-tale whistle of air sucking out into the void, but no whistle came.

"That's queer," he said, puzzled. "There must be air outside, too. We're not in a void, after all! How do you account for that?"

"It disproves your idea of a space-warp, Lothar," Cliff observed. "There couldn't be air in a warp. Only explanation is that it's a planet. A planet of total darkness."

"But at least we ought to see the stars," Ken argued.

"Not necessarily. If this planet emits radiations which absorb light—as we know it does—we couldn't see them."

Ken suddenly realized the significance of what Cliff had said.

"Lothar!" he yelled. "Lothar, you double-crossing liar. This is a mass of Polarium-X. The whole thing ties up. Lothar, where are you?"

There was no answer from the blackness. Ken whirled round and felt his way to the limits of the control room. He finished up gripping Cliff as they both stood in the airlock.

"He's skipped," Ken breathed. "Probably knows this blasted, place as well as he knows his own home. Just wait until I get my hands on him!"

"You mean his frightened act was a trick, too?"

"Sure, it was. He did it deliberately to make us all the keener to go on. Now he's got us here, there's no telling what he'll do. It probably struck him it was an easy way to get rid of us if we came here. Don't you get it, man?" Ken went on urgently. "This is a monstrous hollow globe of Polarium-X, specially made. The size doesn't signify, because it could easily be assembled in space piece by piece. It is between Earth and Moon—and since we know there is a phony space ground at the Arctic, it's possible that field is actually a magnetic device for keeping this thing steady. Yeah, we're inside a globe of Polarium-X all right, and its radiations are such that it kills light of all types. Whether it also causes atavism or not, we can't tell yet. All we've got is a prickling sensation, but so far no primitive instincts."

"Seems to me we've got to get out of here,"

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Cliff muttered.

"Sure—but how? We probably entered easily enough through a prearranged trap which closed afterwards. Right now we've as much chance of finding the exit as a worm has of flying. But at least there is air, so that's in our favor. The other favor is that if we can't see in the dark, neither can Lothar, so he can't take pot shots at us. Our job is to find him somehow and screw the truth out of him. Come on!"

Cautiously they felt their way outside. The truth of Ken Richmond's theory was substantiated now as their boots scraped on metallic ore. They moved slowly, sensing emptiness ahead of them, aware that the basic mass of the substance was apparently dense enough to produce a tolerable Earth-norm gravity.

"If only to goodness there were a light," Cliff moaned. "This darkness is so thick it hurts! Surely there is some sort of light which will work?"

"Depends. This stuff polarizes all the light we know apparently. All we can do is—What's that?" Ken broke off amazedly.

THEY both came to a halt, gripping each others' arms and staring ahead. Something was there, floating in the cavernous gloom, something vaguely luminous. Nor was it alone for it was presently augmented by others.

"Looks like a ghost," Cliff muttered. "Since ghosts don't exist, it's just a light of sorts."

They went on again with infinite care. As they did so, the mystic apparition revealed itself as a living figure—a woman. Fair, slim and beautiful, she was. Nor was she alone. There were others, perhaps a dozen people of both sexes, roughly dressed in shirts and space slacks. Around them were the hazy, ghostly outlines of a room and furniture. It was like looking into another dimension.

"Jumping comets!" Ken cried suddenly, as the woman turned and wafted gently by. "Look! It's—it's Betty!"

"What?" Cliff stared harder. Then he whispered, "You're right! It is she. And fellow over there is Mason Hall."

"Betty!" Ken shouted, oblivious to everything else. He raced forward in the dark towards her, then his cries ended in a thud and a gasp of pain. Cliff caught up with Ken to find him faintly visible in the glow from the mystery area. He was rubbing his forehead furiously.

"I ran into something," he panted, scrambling up. He felt in front of him. "Yes, it's glass," he shouted. "No wonder they didn't hear us. Thick glass. Hey!" he yelled, thumping on it. "Hey, open up there!"

The people beyond took no notice. In fact, they seemed to be watching a distant figure, which grew clearer. It was Lothar. He was holding a ray gun in his hand.

"Ah-ha!" Ken snapped, clutching Cliff's arm. "I get the idea now. This is a sheet of polarizing glass, same as they use on dip-lamps back home. It's not as perfect a light-absorber as Polarium-X and some of the light gets through. The light itself is probably phosphorescent in basis, therefore different to ordinary emitted light. Looks as though this planet is divided into two parts—one black and a trap. The other is tenanted.

"Sure, I get it," Cliff said. "You're right, Ken!"

"The fact that Betty and those others are alive, proves the avatism was a trick, too," Ken went on. "The apes were put there deliberately. I'm going through the glass."

He whipped his ray gun from his belt and aimed a charge at the barrier. Instantly there was a monstrous cracking sound as the searing heat fused it. Another charge and it opened up, leaving a wide crack.

Immediately light of blinding brilliance flooded the two men. They went down with their heads spinning, eyes gripped as if by white hot pincers. While they were still stunned, with their hands over their eyes, they were seized and dragged forward.

It was several minutes before they could see at all. Slowly their eyes became accustomed again to a fairly strong illumination of chemical origin in ceiling bowls.

The first thing they noticed was that they were looking into steadily leveled ray pistols. Lothar held one, and tough looking men with villainous faces were holding the others. Space drifters, Ken realized—scum of the lanes.

He looked around slowly. Cliff and he were in a large room. A wall of glass apparenty black, formed one side of it. Its length had been split from top to bottom where the ray gun charge had struck it. The prisoners around him, under threat of the guns, were all passengers he recognized—those who had supposedly vanished in the Hole.

"Betty!" he exclaimed thankfully, starting to move towards her. "Thank Heaven you're not dead after all."

"Stay right where you are, Richmond," Lothar commanded. "One step further and I'll finish you."

"Seems to me you've had plenty of chances to do that already," Ken retorted. "What's the idea?"

"Believe me, I'm surprised to find you two men in this room," Lothar interrupted. "I figured when I left you in the next compartment that you'd walk over the floor trap that would have dropped you out into space, there to die. Evidently you missed it. Fortune favors fools, you know. Anyway, now that you are here, it means the end of all these people. Otherwise they could have lived—at a price.

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I was just deciding on that price," he added grimly, waving his gun. "The muzzle of a ray-pistol can boost the sum amazingly."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Ken demanded.

A MALIGNANT expression distorted Lothar's face.

"I'll tell you. You guessed right when you figured that the sink-hole is really Polarium-X. It is a complete sphere of it, the Earthward side fitted with traps which admit of entrance and then close again, leaving the victim in the dark. Usually the force of arrival stuns the traveler. He or she is then brought in here—the 'better half' of the globe. A living ape is then sent back by remote control, and a time-bomb fitted to destroy the evidence."

"So I figured it out right," Ken answered.

"Sure." Lothar's grin was horrible to see. "Only it won't do you any good. I had my engineers fashion this globe on Pluto once I had bought the Polarium-X site from Drew. All they had to do was drag it through the void to this spot—easy enough in free space. It was anchored half way between Earth and Moon gravity, accomplished by a gravity unit operating from the Earth Arctic, which you know of—and a gravity unit on the Moon which you don't know about. These picked, trusted men were left here to deal with the incoming people and arrange the ape returns. I've always worked with space pirates. That's how I get all my money. Pretty smart, eh?"

"Pretty low down, too," Ken retorted, clenching his fists.

"My main object was to get the pair of you away from Earth so I could ruin you as Chief Dispatcher," Lothar went on. "If the fate of atavized people did not stir you unduly, then the apparent death of the girl you loved might. I sent a message to Miss Dransfield via my Venusian agents. It purported to come from her parents. She set out for Venus as I expected, and I knew that if she too turned into an apparent ape you'd travel hot-foot along her self-same course—provided you were not killed by the time-bomb on Mason Hall's ship beforehand. You missed the time-bomb, went into space—and those two 'reckless' people who, like Miss Dransfield, apparently wanted to see the Hole at close quarters, were some of my disguised space pirates, detailed to see that she finished the course."

Lothar shrugged. "So it worked out as I had planned. You decided to trap me. Had I given in, I would have had you knocking around alive. So I pretended to be frightened, knowing your obstinate natures would do the rest. It worked—only you didn't fall through the floor trap. Instead you blasted your way in here. As for these folks, it was my idea to let them return home, as I said, after they'd paid me a huge ransom. It would have worked if they hadn't seen you, here. Now there can be no ransom. All of you must die to insure my own safety. A pity, but there it is."

"Just try it," Ken snapped. "You daren't do it. You'd have the whole of the space police on your tracks. This floating prison will be found."

"No." Lothar shook his close-cropped head. "I've only to give orders to the Arctic unit to cut out their power and this globe will drift Moonwards, there to settle gently on the lunar magnetizer. That I am going to do. Once it is there, I shall leave you, depart with my boys here in the one remaining machine in the next compartment. There will be no way out of the tangle for you as the Moon is never visited. You will be left with a useless radio, without food, and on a world without air. And the Government beam will be clear of the mystic peril. What your fate will be is obvious. Since it will be believed you turned into apes, who is going to look for you?"

Desperate, Ken looked around at the others as Lothar turned to a radio apparatus and spoke briefly. He used a short nursery rhyme. Then bringing his gun butt down on the delicate equipment he smashed it in pieces.

"So Adams had you figured out dead right," Cliff said slowly. "Nursery rhymes for instructions."

"I am fully aware of the activities of Serviceman Adams," Lothar said gravely. "I'll deal with him later—fully. Right now, my friends, you can make yourselves comfortable. We have a short journey to the Moon's surface, and then—death! But why should I dwell on that? You can think about it later."

WHITE-FACED, constantly kept apart from each other by the gunmen, the assembled men and women sat down. A sensation of falling crept through all in the globe. Lothar continued to leer at them, gun in hand, his attention never relaxing.

Ken and Cliff sat near Betty Dransfield trying to figure out some way to master the situation. But there was none. Lothar was holding all four aces. The hands of a nearby clock told how quickly time was running out. Once left on the long disused satellite, all hope would vanish.

It seemed eternities before, at last, there came a slight jolt. Lothar cackled in triumph.

"Get the ship ready, boys," he told his men. "Call in the boys from the magnet-house outside, and don't forget your space-suits." He watched them go out, glanced round the taut-faced assembly. "Air may escape when the ship leaves," he said callously, "so perhaps you won't have long to wait

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before the end comes."

He broke off. Ken, realizing that only one gun menaced him now, suddenly catapulted from his chair and hurled himself across the room. He lashed out with his fist, as the ray gun's fire seared across his shoulder. Lothar stumbled backward. Cliff came up and hit Lothar again. His fist struck the fat man clean in the jaw and sent Lothar stumbling against the wall—but he still held onto his gun.

Before Lothar could raise the weapon, Ken Richmond sprang after the fat man like a cat. Wrenching the ray gun from Lothar's grasp, Ken knocked him flat.

"There!" Ken panted, staring down at the dazed man at his feet. "I knew you'd make a slip. Smart rascals such as you always do. There are plenty of charges left in this gun. If you make a move or call out to your pals, I'll burn you to a crisp."

But Lothar was past resistance. His face was pale, covered with sweat. He held up his fat hands pleadingly. There was no pretense about his terror now.

"Don't kill me, Richmond," he pleaded. "I give up. I'll do anything to square matters. I'll even promise to go back to Mars for good."

"Bah," said Ken, in disgust, spurning him with his toe. "You're just a cowardly rat, after all. I always thought so." He frowned, thinking of the other ruffians outside, and the fight before him. It would be one lone ray gun against many.

Cliff Bomont stepped closer and grasped Ken by the arm.

"What's that noise outside?" he muttered. "Maybe it means we're going to have some help with this. You know I told Flip Adams two days ago that the I.S.S. ought to investigate the Moon. I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to raise up any false hopes."

The sounds outside now became more distinct. They were caused by blasting ray guns.

Ken uttered a wild whoop. "That's it—Adams is here with his men!"

Even as Ken spoke, a second voice was heard.

"You are under arrest, Reid Lothar, for piracy, conspiracy and murder. Okay, boys. Take him out and chain him up to those other prize thugs of his. Go on—move."

"Hello, Flip," Ken said, gripping the Serviceman's arm. "I'm glad to see you. But where's your spacesuit? How come you and your boys can walk about like this on the Moon?"

Adams laughed. "We're not on the Moon, feller. We're on Earth. It's all quite simple. I was working on the Lothar case. The authorities ordered the annexation of that illegal 'space ground' in the Arctic, and our men took it over. We soon solved the nursery rhyme code and made certain that Lothar is a scientific criminal. So the authorities seized the Moon as well. It was easily captured."

"Go on," Ken urged him.

"We decided to catch Lothar red-handed," the Serviceman continued. "His going to the Hole did the trick. We got his radio order to pull his Polarium-X globe to the Moon, but switched on our magnets and pulled it to Earth instead. Now Lothar will get life imprisonment for his crimes."

"Nice going," Ken said.

Adams grinned. "Space travel will have a new boss. Ken, the Government has promoted you to the post of General Director in Supreme Charge. Lothar can remember that, while he's doing his life sentence. Also, Cliff isn't going to fare badly, either. Where you go, Cliff goes too, like Mary's lamb. That Polarium-X has vast possibilities in the hands of a physicist who had no dishonest complexes."

Ken chuckled, caught Betty's arm.

"Hear that, Bets? You're going to marry the chief of all inter-planetary communication—and like it!"

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"The time of peril is past," pleaded Merimtrope

THE NEMESIS OF THE ASTROPEDE

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

Handsome Merimtrope plans to deluge the world in blood and betray the lovely High Regent Polydora!

HIS voice rang like a bell through the large ornate audience hall.

"I ask it in the interest of science! What harm if I do violate the Ancient Seal and pass the Forbidden Portals?"

Polydora, President of the Free Communities of the Earth and High Regent of the United World, sat in the Seat of State in the Hall of All Nations at Plaxa, the world capital.

She was a tall, regal-looking woman, with an imperial sweep of brow and features like

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a Greek goddess. Her rich golden locks, bound with clasps of lapis lazuli according to the custom of the day, flowed about a face in which the sternness of leadership was tempered at times by a smile of girlish sweetness. For Polydora, although her extraordinary abilities had thrown her into the planet's pivotal position, was not yet thirty. Now, in the good year 99—2193, Old Reckoning—she was not only sought by diplomats but courted by suitors from the four corners of the world.

But thus far, according to rumor, she had inclined most toward Merimtrope, the young man who now stood before her, beseeching a favor. He was far from unprepossessing, even as the People of the Later Day went. He was tall of limb, broad of frame, powerful of features, with a jutting chin, strong high cheekbones, and a flashy manner of wearing the knee-long color-splashed robes fashionable for men and women alike. Only when you looked into his eyes—those small black eyes that first burned with an intense, shriveling fire, then shifted as if afraid to look you in the face—did you begin to question your first favorable impression.

"Let me pass the Forbidden Portals, Polydora! What harm can it do? Surely, it will only benefit us to learn the secrets buried there."

The President's face, as she gazed at Merimtrope across the Purple Railing of State, wore a grave expression. Swiftly her mind reviewed the events of the last century. How, as a result of the War of the Six Continents, which had ended just a hundred years ago, the world had been left prostrate, stripped of half its female population and nine tenths of its male. How representatives of the women, gathering in furious conclave amid the ruins of Plaxa, for the first time had fixed the blame for the devastation of the earth on male aggressiveness. How they had decided that, so long as men had political control, wars would continue. How they had voted for a new world system, in which complete power would be in feminine hands. How, being five times as numerous as the men—of whom all the more vigorous specimens had perished in the conflict—they had been able to enforce their decrees. Since then only women had held office, and men had devoted themselves to science, industry and the like, while their wives and sisters ruled so well that there had been no war in a hundred years.

ALL this Polydora remembered. She also recollected how the old lore, the mechanical lore that had made fighting so terrible, had all been destroyed on the accession of the great Thressinga, the first World President. That is, all except the comparatively few machines and formulae which had been preserved beyond the Forbidden Portals of the Universal Museum of Plaxa. The retention of even these few had been opposed by a large party, and had been the single concession to the males. But this exception was thought to be meaningless, since stern edicts forbade any one to enter the Forbidden Portals without permission from the President, which no President yet had ever granted.

Yet here was Merimtrope urging Polydora to rescind the century-old prohibition!

"A hundred years have gone by," he pleaded. "The time of peril is past. Who knows that invaluable scientific secrets may not be buried there? Surely, Polydora, you are too wise, too enlightened to be held back by a superstition."

This appeal was reinforced by a smile which Polydora could not help returning.

"I will think it over—I will think it over," she mused, as she stared indulgently down at Merimtrope. A faint flush, suffusing the queenly features, implied that mere principles of state might not decide.

Not many minutes after Merimtrope had bowed his way out, a slimmer figure had entered. Slight of frame, with the gray withdrawn eyes of a dreamer and a lean scholar's face, Larrow was hardly older than the other man, but gave an impression not of a coldness like Merimtrope's but of incisive intelligence tempered by warmth.

Certainly, there was warmth in his gaze as he stared up at Polydora, but there was also sadness, for how could he, a mere sub-Curator of the Universal Museum, hope to win favor in the sight of the most sought-after woman on earth? How could he compete with that dandy of a Merimtrope, who was always being admitted to an audience with her, and who, moreover, had been placed by her in the high post of City Engineer of Plaxa? But did Larrow not truly love her, for her own superb self, and not for her position or fame? Was it not of her that he continually dreamed?

Yet her voice, as it reached him from the high sapphire-studded chair of state, did not have a lover-like quality. It was crisp, steady, authoritative.

"Larrow, I have summoned you in the absence of your chief Herminand," she said. "As acting curator you have charge, have you not, of the keys to the Ancient Portals?"

Larrow turned pale. A dark intimation had flashed across his mind.

"Yes, Excellency."

"You know our City Engineer, Merimtrope, do you not?"

"Indeed I do, Excellency."

"If he should ask for the keys, let him have them. That is all."

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"But, Excellency, this—why, this is unheard of!" gasped Larrow. "The Ancient Secrets—the Ancient Secrets must be guarded. You know they must be—"

"You heard what I said!" interrupted Polydora, crisply. "That is all."

Seeing the angry fires in the President's vivid blue eyes, Larrow knew that he had no choice. Yet as he dragged his way out of the Hall of All Nations, he had a feeling as if the mighty marble columns of that colossal edifice were about to collapse upon his head.

In the Hall of the Black Eras, behind the Forbidden Portals of the Universal Museum, the air was stagnant and musty-smelling. Tempered by the heavy dark curtains, the electric lights let out a dull glow that gave a tomb-like effect to the great vaulted recesses. As he made his way among the glass cases filled with intricate machines, the visitor would have looked like an intruder in a sepulchre, could any observer have seen him.

Merimtrope's black eyes glittered. With a devouring gaze, he paused before each case. The one that held him longest was the central display.

THIS represented a curious fish-shaped car, which, pointed upward at an angle of forty-five degrees, was all sheathed in a glistening coppery metal. More than a hundred feet long and fifteen or twenty in width, it was windowless except for a few small eye-slits, but there were several openings or hatches a little like torpedo tubes. In each of these a formidable-looking, bullet-shaped contrivance, two feet across and ten or twelve long, had been placed as if on exhibition.

"Ah," muttered Merimtrope. "The Astropede!"

The Astropede, as every one had heard with shudders of horror, was an instrument of destruction invented at the close of the last war—the most powerful ever conceived, it was said. But since, unhappily, the War of the Six Continents had ended before the device could be tried, no one really knew just how devastating it could be.

"Too bad," reflected Merimtrope. "Too bad!" What manner of men had his fathers been, that they had let so dire an implement go to waste?

The machine itself interested him less than did a little red-marked document preserved at one side under a glass case. Strain his eyes as he would, Merimtrope could not make out any of the figures beneath the glass barrier. Yet was it not for this, the scientific formulae behind the Astropede, that he had cajoled Polydora into letting him pass the Forbidden Portals?

For only a moment he hesitated. True, the act he contemplated was not only prohibited, it was held to be a crime against the White Eras. If discovered he would be given a pinch of lethal powder and required to swallow it within twenty-four hours. But who would discover him? Polydora had granted permission to him only. Not even a guard would dare pass the Portals, now safely hidden from view behind winding galleries. If any one should come in hereafter and learn what had happened, how prove who was responsible? Might it not seem that some thief had entered unknown to any one?

Besides, by the time the act was detected, he would have accomplished his purpose!

So reflecting, Merimtrope lifted his sandaled heel and brought it crashing down against the glass. A minute later, the red-marked document was concealed in the folds of his robes, while the fragments of glass lay hidden in a corner.

Not long afterwards, the City Engineer was rumored to be engaged in a secret mining project miles to the west of the city. Just what the project involved was not known, for several acres were walled off with barbed wire, but it was reported that valuable minerals had been found and were being developed for Polydora's benefit.

This story had, indeed, a foundation in fact, the fact being that Merimtrope had just made this statement to the President. With her complete faith in him, she had let him dig for the rare metals he claimed to have discovered. Pre-occupied as she was with matters of state, and having no knowledge of science, why should she bother to see the great shaft, twenty feet thick and a hundred yards long, which was being dug at a forty-five degree angle? Why should she care if a fish-shaped car, sheathed in a glistening coppery metal, was taking shape within the excavation?

All this Merimtrope took great pains to keep secret. Only those of the inner circle, his trusted friends and advisers, were admitted inside the enclosure. Since most of the work was done by inter-atomic machines, hardly any laborers were needed.

But how astonished Polydora would have been to have overheard the conversation between Merimtrope and his friend Wendaye, the Assistant City Engineer, on the evening after his passage of the Forbidden Portals!

EXCITEDLY Merimtrope paced the floor of his glass-enclosed tower studio, while Wendaye stood regarding him, arms akimbo, in an attitude of deep contemplation.

"This has been a woman's world too accursedly long," the former was exclaiming. "What are we men, anyhow? Mere babes-in-arms that have to mind our mammas? Of

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course, you can say the old girls have ruled well enough for a hundred years. But is it fair for men like me to be kept from office just because we're men? By my father's ghost, it hurts my self-respect. I long for the stirring old days!"

"I, too!" agreed Wendaye, his hawk eyes gleaming. "Woman's place, if you ask me, is in the nursery. It's high time for us men to re-assert ourselves."

"Exactly."

"But how? That's the question. The women—curse them—have the legal and moral power."

"Legal and moral be hanged. What counts is the physical force. And I have that now."

"You have that?"

"Yes, I have it."

In excited whispers, Merimtrope told of his visit past the Forbidden Portals. Then he displayed the red-sealed document.

"You see, it's quite practicable," he explained, his hooked fingers trembling as he and his assistant pored over the papers. "It's easy enough to make an Astropede, now that we have the plans."

"Let's see if I understand," Wendaye cried, a baleful glint shining from his reddish uneasy eyes. "The Astropede is a rocket car that can shoot beyond the stratosphere, is it not? It carries a crew of five. Having passed the limits of the atmosphere, it goes circling around the earth as a satellite. It can keep on its course for months, before its crew send it back to earth."

"Just so," Merimtrope explained enthusiastically. "And each time it passes a certain place—say, Plaxa—it can discharge some of the machine-bombs, which shatter into ten thousand explosive fragments, each as powerful as a six-inch shell. There's no defense against it. No earth-battery, no stratospheric plane could reach that rocket car. Surrender is the only recourse!"

"Then, in no time at all, we could take Plaxa—could make ourselves its rulers," exclaimed Wendaye.

"Yes, and end the reign of women!"

The conspirators did not mention that, incidentally, they would bring back the old ordeal of terror and bloodshed. They did not mention the treason of overthrowing the President whom the whole world loved and admired, and who had treated the plotters themselves with signal favor. Ambition, the ancient autocrat, glittered from their eyes as they silently shook hands and began poring anew over the formulae for the Astropede.

Even as Merimtrope took the keys to the Forbidden Portals, Larrow had noted the avid look in the City Engineer's eyes. He had seen the eagerness with which the latter entered the secret corridors. He had observed the inordinate length of time that passed before Merimtrope's return. Furthermore, he did not miss the expression, half furtive and half gloating, which played about the man's audacious features as he handed back the keys.

Larrow had never liked Merimtrope, but it was not mere dislike that forced upon him the conviction that the City Engineer was up to mischief. A suspicion, so terrible that he blamed himself for even entertaining it, flashed into Larrow's mind. The thought persisted. He could not rid himself of it, until gradually the idea of possible counteraction took hold of him.

Should he not enter the Forbidden Portals, and try to discover what Merimtrope had been doing there? In his official position at the Museum, he could slip in at any time—though this was strictly against the law and he would have to taste the Drug of Annihilation if caught. For a long while he debated the matter. As he did so, his mind formed a vision of the noble, classic face of Polydora, with her rich golden locks and eyes tinted like the sparkling blue sea. For her sake he decided he must take the risk.

AS HE stole into the Hall of the Black Eras he felt as if the ghosts of past centuries were pursuing him in the tomb-like recesses beneath the heavy dark curtains. Only by a supreme effort of the will did he force himself through the musty atmosphere and among the cases of grisly-looking machines. Some sure instinct brought him directly to the central display, where, according to the descriptions which he knew by heart, the model of the Astropede should be, along with a little glass case containing the plans.

There was the Astropede, untouched. But where were the plans? For several minutes Larrow searched in vain. Then his eyes fell upon a small telltale fragment of glass upon the floor. As clearly as if it had been marked in blazing letters, he knew what had happened.

Larrow's heart was heavy as he made his way back past the Forbidden Portals. Now he knew that dire catastrophe threatened. knew that Merimtrope, beneath the whip of ambition, would stop at nothing. But how could Larrow inform Polydora? To tell her what he knew would be to reveal that he had passed the Forbidden Portals himself. This would mean that he must consume the Drug of Annihilation, while Merimtrope remained free to pursue his plans. No, he must find some subtler way.

For days he pondered, without coming to any conclusion. Meanwhile, hearing of Merimtrope's alleged mine, he realized what the City Engineer had in view. Only then did he seek an audience with the President, hop-

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ing by means of sly hints to put her on the trail.

As always Polydora's beauty made him forget that he was a mere citizen and she the Head of State. But, as always, she received him with stern dignity, as befits a ruler addressing one of the rank and file.

"Well, Larrow, what news today?"

"Not exactly any news, Excellency. Forgive me if I express a thought that has troubled me for many days. It was I, as you know, who gave City Engineer Merimtrope the keys to the Forbidden Portals."

At mention of this name, Polydora bristled slightly, and sat up more alertly in the Seat of State. A faint color overspread the exquisite oval of her face.

"Perhaps I am wrong, Excellency," Larrow went on, "but I feel sure I am not. That which I saw in the eyes of Merimtrope—and I have trained myself to read men's eyes, Excellency—bodes no good for us all. So, as a loyal citizen, I have come to beg you to keep careful watch over him—to investigate, in particular, his mine west of the city, where, I have ascertained, geologists believe there can be no ore worth recovering."

POLYDORA shot up from her seat, a tall, majestic figure of wrath. Her words were restrained, but her emotion was evident.

"What is that? You have the effrontery, Larrow, to cast aspersions on one far better than you? Fie on you! You should be ashamed of yourself. If there is anything you know, I shall be glad to hear it. But these vague, unproved imputations, these vaporings of jealousy and rage, they may be worthy of a gossiping old granddame. But not of a man, Larrow. Not of a man!"

"But, Excellency," protested Larrow, writhing beneath the rebuke, "it is not jealousy or rage. Will you listen to me?"

"I will not listen! There are more important things before me than your sputterings, Larrow. Some day, when you are reasonable, I may hear you again. Meanwhile, I warn you, do not besmirch the good name of one of our leading citizens."

Retreating like one whom a shower of blows had struck, Larrow was grieved not only because Polydora was unaware of her peril, but because she had unwittingly testified to the depth of her devotion for Merimtrope.

Thenceforth, he perceived, nothing could be done through Polydora directly. But did this not merely prove the need for some more emphatic action?

Yet what action was possible? Before many days rumors told him the work within the so-called mine was nearly complete. These reports he could not verify, but the self-satisfied, jubilant manner in which Merimtrope stalked about nowadays, like one who has the world in his pocket, seemed complete substantiation of the news. Clearly, the time for action was soon or never.

It was then that he resolved upon a desperate expedient. It seemed to have a slight chance though if anything went wrong, it would cost Larrow his life.

First of all, he must find his way into Merimtrope's enclosure west of town. But how? If seen and recognized, he would be blotted out without compunction. Merimtrope's enclosure was not only surrounded with electrically charged barbed wire, but was protected by armed guards.

It was not exactly a new method that Larrow had in mind, although a highly hazardous one. The supposed mine would require large quantities of supplies, and these could only come from the Municipal Warehouse of Plaxa. With this fact in view, Larrow carefully concocted his scheme.

His first step was to absent himself from the museum, on the plea of illness. His second was to disguise himself. He clipped off his moustache, added spectacles, dyed his hair until it appeared grizzled, and dressed himself in unkempt clothes. His third move was to seek employment at the Municipal Warehouse, where, because of the heavy work and the low wages, helpers were constantly sought.

Once established as a clerk in the shipping department, he was not long in learning what goods were destined for Merimtrope. Hence he was able to carry out his scheme one morning when, by deliberate design, he arrived ahead of his fellow workers. In his robes a few small tools were concealed, a knife, a pocket-size saw, a monkey-wrench, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, a flashlight. In his mind a desperate resolve remained planted.

There was a wooden case, not yet boarded down, which contained a canvas-like cloth ordered by Merimtrope. It was the matter of but a moment for Larrow to remove and hide part of this material, while he placed himself in the two-by-ten space beneath the remaining cloth, and drew it over himself so as to leave the appearance of the whole unchanged. A few inconspicuous holes, hastily drilled in the sides of the box, would provide him with air.

Overheated, wet with perspiration, and half suffocated despite the air-holes, he lay motionless in his casket-like hideout. He heard the lid hammered down above him, felt himself being jerked and carried away, now on one side, now on the other, now upside down. After a seemingly endless interval, while he gasped for breath as in a living grave, there came a jar that left him

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stunned. Only after some time, when his senses had gradually returned, did he realize that the box had reached its destination.

NOW came the most dangerous test of all, as he used the pliers and saw to break his way out of the box. If any workmen were near at hand, he would not only fail to save Polydora, but would throw his life away all for nothing. But he took hope from the fact that work in the enclosure was done by machinery, whose noise would drown out the sound of the tools.

He had not miscalculated. Before many minutes he found himself stepping out into a dimly lighted enclosure, reminding him of a subway tube, except that it had a slant as of a steep hill. Even in his slightly dazed condition, he recognized this as the inside of the Astropede.

Guided by the whizzing of machines forward, he climbed at a dangerous slant, until he was just outside a little cabin, which was the source of the light. Within it, several men were gathered. Now and then, by pressing one ear to the wall, he could catch fragments of their conversation when the noise of the machinery temporarily died down.

"Well," he heard a jubilant voice, which he recognized as that of Merimtrope, "it's almost done!"

"Almost," came an exultant echo. Then for a minute Larrow could not distinguish anything.

"All that's left now is to fix the interspatial controls," a speaker finally remarked.

"Make sure they're set at forty-eight degrees," Merimtrope cautioned. "Anything more than that, and we can kiss good-bye to—"

Larrow did not catch the last word, but had no trouble in guessing it.

It was three or four minutes before he could make out any more of the conversation. But the next words startled him.

"This evening, then?"

"This evening at sunset."

"Splendid. Let's get a little rest before we start."

Larrow heard a chuckling laughter, then a shuffling of heavy forms in his direction. Crouching motionless against the wall, he feared detection to be but an instant away as three men filed out of the cabin door. But they brushed past his shadowed shape without appearing to notice it and, with a bellowing of obscene oaths, disappeared forward.

Never had Larrow realized that the time was so short. He must checkmate the conspirators in the remaining few hours before sunset!

There was hardly time for caution, yet Larrow was saved by the complete absence of workers in the hold of the Astropede. Fumbling down through the steep gloom, he did not dare to use his flashlight until several partitions separated him from the cabin. Then, by the sparing use of the rays, he searched for the engine-room.

Only after what seemed eternities of blind groping did he push open a door into a little room equipped with an intricacy of compasses, field telescopes, and other instruments.

"Ah!" he thought. "The navigator's cabin!"

Working at increased tempo, he examined some knobs, dials and rods, among which he discovered a series marked, "Interspatial Controls." The latter were set at forty-eight degrees! Now, for the first time, a thrill as of accomplishment shot through Larrow.

The next problem was to discover the connections of the inter-spatial controls. Any tampering in the navigator's cabin would be instantly discovered, but alterations elsewhere might not be detected so easily.

Another difficult hour had passed before he had worked his way into the compartment behind the navigator's cabin, and, amid a complexity of machinery, found the jointed series of rods connecting with the interspatial controls. These, he saw clearly, were intended to keep the ship at a definite angle in its flight. Any increase above the established forty-eight degrees meant that it might escape from control and fly off into space.

As he made these observations, he was almost thrown to his feet by a violent shuddering of the vessel, a little like an earthquake. Could they be setting out already? But no! the shuddering quickly died down. This was only a preliminary try-out of the engines. But never had Larrow been so aware of the urgency for haste.

IN TERROR of being trapped in the Astropede, he set to work. How fortunate that he had brought his tools! Here and there he loosened a screw, yonder he untightened a bolt or two. That was all. An inspector would have had to look very closely to discover anything amiss, but he knew that the controls would work free, so that they would not obey the navigator's will. While the machine apparently was set at forty-eight degrees, it might actualy start out at fifty-eight or sixty-eight. Before the source of the trouble could be discovered and corrected, it would be too late!

Such, at least, was Larrow's hope. But for one brief terrorized instant, he had the impression that it was he who was too late. For the vessel gave yet another shudder, as if on a preliminary warm-up.

Now for the last and almost the most dif-

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ficult part of his project. How escape unseen? Of course Larrow knew that his only chance was through one of the hatches that lined the vessel's sides, waiting to be filled with their deadly projectiles. His problem therefore was to slip down into one of them, pry loose the fastenings, and squeeze his way into the excavation.

Fortunately, the rumbling of machinery forward still drowned out the noise of Larrow's tools, and he managed, after what seemed hours, to unloosen the hatch lid. There was a space of but a foot or two beneath, between the hatch and the earth of the shaft. After fastening the lid back into place, Larrow had to creep between the Astropede and the earth in complete blackness along a cavity barely wide enough to contain him.

He was still cautiously descending when, with stunning suddenness, he slipped and found himself in a pit six feet deep. Bruised and confused, he was about to pick himself up, when a deafening hiss came to his ears, a great shadow shot above him followed by a blazing crimson light, a reek of half-suffocating fumes came to his nostrils, and a whirlwind seemed to catch him and toss him about.

When, a minute later, he came to himself, he saw that the shaft was empty. From high above, he could make out the red glow of sunset. . .

Thousands of spectators had been startled by the apparition of the fish-shaped monster, which, followed by jets of fire, had leapt into the evening skies and disappeared like a meteor. Yet it was long before the world had learned the story behind this flaming vision. The one man who knew the facts did not reveal them until many days had gone by—not until he had had time to be certain of his results.

At last, convinced by Merimtrope's silence that he and his henchmen had vanished forever in the outer abysses of the Solar System, he sought an audience with Polydora, and made a complete confession.

"Now Excellency," he finished his recital, as she stared down at him with grave attentive eyes, "you may prescribe the Drug of Annihilation. I have broken the law, and am ready to suffer the penalty."

A long silent moment passed. A faint smile fluttered to the President's face.

"No, Larrow, the error was not yours," she said. "I do not reward the people's savior with the Drug of Annihilation. Besides—" here she tugged absently at the lapis-lazuli clasps of her golden locks—"we will be needing a new City Engineer. Would you care to consider it?"

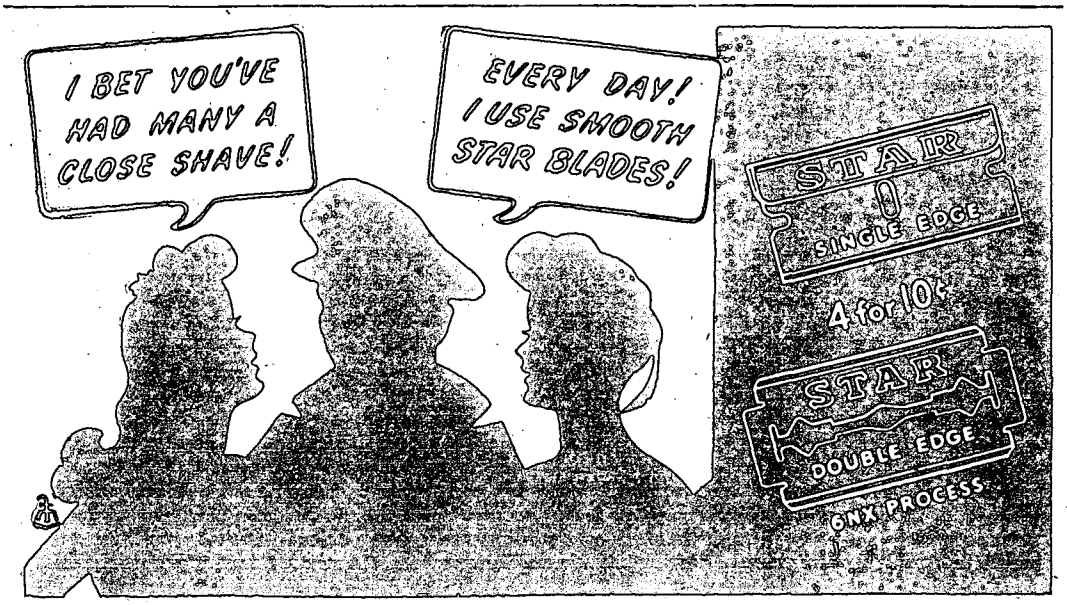
"Oh, Excellency!" Larrow burst forth, overwhelmed.

"Why do you call me 'Excellency'?" she rebuked him, with a beaming light in her face. "My name is Polydora."

"I shall be delighted—Polydora!"

Her answering smile assured him that he had accomplished even more than he had intended in ridding the world of Merimtrope and the Astropede.

Next Issue's Novel: FORGOTTEN WORLD, by Edmond Hamilton



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Like madmen, we stared at the nugget of gravium and became lost in the dream of fantastic wealth

COSMIC CARAVAN

By ED WESTON

Amid the muck and torrential storms of Venus, a greed-mad band of space adventurers fights a soul-shaking battle in a tempestuous rush for the possession of boundless wealth!

CHAPTER I

Expedition to Venus

I WAS in McGurk's Bar trying to conjure a story out of a whisky glass when Hansen prowled in and drew me to a booth. Lifted me, would be more accurate. He had a hard, rock-miner's shoulders, that man. The rest of him consisted of fists like hams, a chin like a grand piano, and wide blue eyes shedding the human kindness of a wolf.

"For the last ten years they've been experimenting with space ships," he said. "How many of them have really worked?"

"One," I told him. "If you call it working. Apparently, Hugo Thomas got to Venus and returned near enough to Earth to radio about it. Then he vanished."

Hansen looked wise. "That's all his young protégé, Sails, ever gave out. But Sails had the only equipment in the world to pick up

A COMPLETE INTERPLANETARY NOVELET

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that space message!"

I sat forward at his tone. The incident had occurred five years previously. All the world had wondered how much the taciturn young scientist had failed to divulge.

"Thomas discovered enormous teklite beds near the Venusian north pole," Hansen told me. "He instructed Sails to build another space ship and go after it."

I swallowed hard. "And Sails has built one secretly?"

Hansen just chuckled.

"Good grief!" I gasped. Then I squinted at Hansen. "But where do you fit in? Sails would only trust the very pick of the scientific world in this."

"Unfortunately for Sails', Hugo Thomas specified no scientists. He wanted an expeditionary party limited to clean-cut, typical young Americans." He paused and looked innocently at the ceiling. "Sails had to come to me for the financing."

He gave the names of the men selected. There was Costigan, the Lansing Landslide at Michigan ten years back. Deval, who knew how to take other men's inventive ideas and make them practicable. Akeley, whose business was filling stations, but who dabbled with archaeology. Martin, who was a bug for exploration. Winslow, who owned a small tool and machine works somewhere. Fabray, a chemical specialist in metal gasses. Sampson, a construction engineer. A cluck named Jake Reese who unaccountably made money at anything he went into. "Sails," Hansen and myself.

I considered my total lack of qualifications for such a trip.

"Why pick on me to share your suicide plan?" I asked.

Hansen grinned. "I named you," he said.

"Thanks for my murder!" I snapped. "Why?"

HE TAPPED my hand with a forefinger like a railroad spike. "Because you are the only newspaper reporter I know who'll tell the story just as it happened. Also Thomas suggested you."

"You wouldn't mean there may be dirty work?" I suggested.

Hansen's eyes glittered. "Nobody can guess about that. What do you know of gravium?"

I dug into my memory. "It's fabulous stuff. So rare it can be produced only in the most minute quantities by the most delicate synthesis known to science. And at enormous expense. It belongs to the platinum family. It is heavier than blazes. Its ore would be teklite if we had teklite on Earth. Which we haven't. So we have no gravium."

He nodded. "Know why we need it?"

"Sure. It's the only known stuff which can insulate neutrons. Gravium's vitally needed for atomic furnaces."

He considered me for a long time.

"Gravium, pal, is worth one half million dollars per ounce," he said. "Any man who possessed a pound could run the world."

I began to conceive the magnitude of this cosmic jaunt!

He bit off the tip of a cigar and put an even glow upon the end. "Now you understand the reporter part. I'm not looking for a chronicler with idealistic urges. I'm not risking my neck for humanity!"

I shot him a look of sardonic humor. The fellow who prints the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin could not have put all of Hansen's sins against humanity on the outside of a battle cruiser! He flew the Jolly Roger, but he was a good pirate in his way.

The idea of the trip was mad. It was crazy. If Hugo Thomas couldn't get back, what chance would we have? But if we did manage it, I'd have the biggest news scoop in history. And incidentally, enough money to buy a string of newspapers.

"I'm dotty, but count me in," I said. "Now let's have a drink."

Then Hansen gave me another jolt—a bigger one, this time. He told me the ship was all ready and set to go, and that we'd leave in four or five hours. I was stunned.

So we really were starting off for Venus!

I didn't want to think about it. I suggested another drink. In fact, I got plastered. But Hansen took care of me. Later he poured me aboard the ship and, before I got the feathers out of my brain, we were off.

To a world familiar with Hugo Thomas' earlier ship there was nothing unusual in this craft, except that it was larger. It was shaped like a huge sea-ray and utilized common principles of jet propulsion within the atmosphere. Out of the atmosphere it was non-controllable. It was launched by catapult and flung off gravity by powerful rockets.

Its course was computed in advance and directed from flight inception by the time-angle of catapult and rocket performance within bands of atmosphere. If the computation was a fraction off, we had only a brief time in the atmosphere to rectify the error—or else!

The chief scientific advancements involved were in metals, alloys, insulation of the shell, the delicate in-gravity gyro-course controls, and the internal telescoping break system to remove the terrific shock of starting out of a stationary position and gaining 25,200 miles per hour, within forty minutes. This speed was just sufficient to escape the gravitational pull of Earth and put us on a parabola. Greater speeds would have involved enormous increase of armor weight to combat the rising ratio of friction.

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Various bulkheads and insulation chambers of the shell totaled eighteen feet solid thickness. The outer skin was a foot and a half thick. It was estimated that by our return to Earth, this thickness would have been reduced to between four and seven inches by friction.

Sails had followed Hugh Thomas' instructions to the letter. Sails was a scientific fanatic. To him, this was the greatest event in all science history. But instead of having the world's leading scientists along, he had what to him were a bunch of playboys. He didn't like that.

At first, when we took off from Earth, we were filled with excitement. But our exuberance soon simmered down to a simple state of wonder, like a child might feel in a dream.

THERE was something awe-inspiring about limitless space. We spent a lot of time looking out at that vast blackness dotted with billions of brilliant stars. It gave us a feeling of unimportance.

But we soon got used to that and turned to common everyday talk—endless arguments over baseball, politics and bridge. It's not strange that Sails grew bitterly disgusted.

But our smug conceit disappeared when we hit the cold field.

Until then, space temperature had remained at dead zero. At no other time had it varied the slightest on our thermometers. But suddenly we passed through some invisible field which turned the air so cold it nearly froze our lungs. Dampness instantly shimmered as crystals. Hoarfrost lay across our flesh. Had the field been one second wider, it would have frozen our air-conditioning mechanism solid.

This field came as a complete surprise. There was nothing to explain its existence, or why it was there. We had no warning.

We had barely recovered our self confidence when we had a second brush with oblivion. Light blasted out of that lightless void outside. It came right through our insulated shell and knocked us flat.

Do I make that clear? Light, which is supposed to have no body or weight, came through eighteen inches of insulated shell with such force that it knocked us down, and out, and left us shaky for days!

That frightened us plenty. Such unknown perils unhinge common sense and reason and stir up primitive fears. Space neurosis was getting us down. Then Hansen stalked belligerently among us.

"Maybe it was a devil," he bellowed. "But I'd fight fifty thousand devils for the fortune we're going to make!"

That toughness saved us. It shamed us. It put fight back into us and boosted our morale just at a time when courage was needed most.

CHAPTER II

Gravium Fever

VENUS whirled like a great green pinwheel out of the black void on our starboard bow. It grew fantastically, floating obliquely toward our plotted conjunction. There was an awesome majesty to the pale glistening planet, festooned with wisps of clouds.

We shot suddenly into pea soup atmosphere. Circling the planet, Sails handled the craft now with admirable skill. Our rockets boomed. At last we bumped, landed, and jolted to a halt.

Sails came to the door of the control room and looked at us with frozen contempt. I knew he was thinking of the ten greatest names in science who might have been in our places.

"All right, gentlemen," he said with bitter sarcasm. "You are within two hundred miles of the Venusian north pole and your wonderful fortunes!"

Then somebody swung the thick ports open and we jumped down onto Venus.

Impenetrable green fog strung by in slowly writhing blankets. A strange, sulphurous smell hit our nostrils. There was light, but it came from the fog itself—a green phosphorescent opalescence that glared most brightly where the fog was thickest. There was thick mud underfoot.

We lifted our voices in a mighty yell. Emotions of relief and victory surged up wildly. Laughing and shouting, we tossed each other in the mire. We rubbed ooze onto our faces and into each other's hair. We romped with that unpent boisterousness of huskies in the year's first snow.

Soon I remembered my job and slipped on actinic ray goggles to scrutinize the planet. What I saw cooled my high ardor.

It was a land of utter desolation—a place of brooding quiet fresh from some diluvian age. Before me lay a green wet world of vast distances and swirling fog. Huge lichens clung close to the hideous green muck. They were the only life.

A sudden clanking noise froze me and crisped the hair along my neck. I saw Hansen's hilarity vanish. He tested his balance and took his bearings on the spaceship's open port. Deval fell into a position of defense. Akeley moved back a step like a waiting cat.

A diminutive tractor suddenly emerged from the fog. A huge man was sitting astride, riding the box like a bicycle. He resembled an Earth being, but he was green. Green from

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his long hair and bushy eyebrows and flesh to the fabric of his clothes.

He drew the tractor around and stopped. Hansen stared. He put out a big muscular hand and felt the man's shoulders.

"Hugo Thomas!" he boomed. "You're alive and here."

"Facts which I can verify," the scientist answered.

His words came slowly and with difficulty, for he had been many years alone. Emotion made his voice tremble.

Sails rushed forward and embraced Thomas as one resurrected from the dead. Thomas' eyes glistened as he returned the younger man's bearlike hug.

Then he turned from Sails and put a big green hand on Hansen's shoulder. It was easy to see these two men understood and respected each other.

Thomas explained that he had radioed from a point near Earth, but a force field had whipped him around and straight back to Venus.

"You could have taken off for Earth again," I said, nettled.

He shrugged. "There was much work to do here and Earth had my message. Sooner or later somebody was bound to come along." Sharp humor crinkled his broad face. "I rather suspected it would be you, Hansen."

"You were careful not to suggest my name," Hansen growled.

The scientist chuckled. "What need to? Gravium and you—a fortune and a big risk—the toughest mining job in history—It was as natural as the swing of a needle toward a magnet."

Hansen rubbed his hands. "Then the gravium is here? There is teklite?" A glow smoldered in his eyes.

Thomas gestured toward a low ridge. "Right on the surface."

Hansen didn't hesitate. Unable to contain himself, he started for the ridge. His feelings were contagious. I have seen gold rushes and stake races for diamond claims, but I've never seen men go berserk as we did.

FIFTY yards from the ship, men began to stagger and drop. We hadn't adjusted ourselves to the low gravity or atmosphere. Our lightest motions threw us off balance and left us spent. Heaven knows what our blood pressure must have been in our crazed excitement.

When I got to the ridge, Hansen and Akeley were digging furiously. Costigan came up gasping. Then Deval and Fabray, and Martin reeled forward and fell. Nobody paid the slightest attention. Every man was too frantic, digging his bare hands into that miasmic muck.

I think Hansen's fever was wildest, and yet he was coolest of the lot. He stopped suddenly, staring into the fog. Seizing the filter scanner, he walked away. When he returned, there was a hard setness to his face.

"I can't make out the ship," he said in a worried voice.

Weird ideas pass through the mind in a new world. Maybe the ship had disintegrated. Maybe it wasn't there. Maybe somebody had flown it away. It was like being marooned on a strange atoll, without any way of getting off.

I took the scanner and climbed the low ridge. Nothing but green glare met my gaze. I turned back, filled with terror. Now there was no sign of the men. I yelled. The fog swallowed my voice. Really swallowed it, as thoroughly as sound absorbers in laboratories. Panic-stricken, I bolted down the ridge and bumped into Akeley without seeing him! Yet there was still the same intensity of light.

Hansen showed his mettle at that moment.

"Well, we can't stay here," he snapped. "Our oxygen's running out. Back to the ship. Come on!"

"But what if we get lost," Reese whimpered.

"Then crawl!" Hansen barked.

He was brutal, but his voice gave us fresh confidence. There was plenty of fighting spirit in Hansen.

He moved ahead, a gigantic shadow in the green fog. I kept at his heels, yet the suck of his footsteps sounded as a bare whisper. I grew desperately tired—the weariness of utter exhaustion. I fell, got up, and fell again. The twentieth time I quit fighting the fog and oozing muck. I slept right there.

I awakened with an instant sense of desertion. The light had not changed, but that meant nothing. I shouted. Slowly, the terrible fact seeped into me. The fog was now completely sound absorbent. Not a sound came back.

An unreasoning anger boiled up through me—a fury that I had come all this way through space to get lost within a few yards of my ship. I clambered to my feet and plunged ahead. My heart pumped madly, but I kept on until something hard hit me on the forehead and blocked my passage.

I could see nothing, but I felt the ship's hull, and recognized it, immediately in front of me. I groped for the hatch and dragged myself in. I have felt strong emotions in my life, but never such utter relief as coming through that port.

* * *

I did not recover from my oxygen exhaustion until several hours later. Perhaps my condition was complicated by the dampness of the atmosphere. I came into semi-con-

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sciousness, and grew vaguely aware of Sails talking passionately.

"Earth has got to have gravium dirt cheap, Professor!" he was shouting. "Science needs it as a man needs water."

Thomas sounded faintly amused. "Well, how would fifty dollars an ounce be for a starting price? Eventually we may get it down to the price of steel or iron."

I felt a vague disturbance at this thought, but I drifted back into coma. When I finally awakened, Hansen, Akeley and Deval were sitting at the ward table talking. Deval poured me a cup of coffee and brandy. Sails had gone.

I had forgotten about local gravity and I nearly knocked out my teeth with the coffee cup, but the strong, hot drink cleared my head and gave me fresh strength.

"You heard it, Akeley, and so did you, Deval!" Hansen said in hard tones. "Gravium, the professor said. Not teklite. But the pure stuff! At fifty dollars an ounce!" He broke off and glared with rage. "That would mean about ten thousand dollars each for risking our bloody necks to get to this green hell and back through space!"

DEVAL turned to glance at us.

"Sails would give his share to science," he growled. "That would kill the market for the time. We'd have something worth a fortune we couldn't sell!"

"Sails acts mighty strange to me at times," Hansen said in a rasping voice. "A few months in a sanitarium might do him good. But we couldn't put a man like Thomas away easily. If he gets back to Earth, he'll be a tin god."

"If he gets back?" Akeley demanded sharply.

Hansen met his look with one fully as black. Then he lighted a cigarette. Hansen was a shrewd customer. He never said too much at one time. He let his ideas take root.

We ate heavily and had just finished when Sails and Thomas came in. The scientist beamed. It was hard to think of doing anything to such a man.

After a glance at each of us, he nodded with satisfaction. "Good! You boys are all well again. You were lucky to get back. Hereafter, don't forget to watch the light changes on Venus."

"How can we know?" Hansen asked.

"Well, it's difficult," Thomas admitted. "The light intensity never varies. But the angles of the rays do. They have peculiar properties in the fog. Filters are only serviceable five out of fourteen hours."

Hansen considered. "We could rig guide lines from here to the ridge. But it's too wet for mining. We'd better wait for dry weather."

Thomas eyes widened. He coughed with embarrassment.

"Perhaps I should have warned you," he apologized. "This is the dry season."

"This?" Costigan whispered unbelievingly.

Thomas nodded. "In a few days it begins to rain. Drizzles for seventy-six days, Earth time. Then it gets really wet."

I stared, trying to imagine such iron resolution. For five long years he remained marooned in this steaming green hell of wet and muck!

Hansen's thoughts were more direct.

"We couldn't mine an open pit with our pumps," he said hollowly.

The scientist smiled. "I have the right kind of pumps in my spaceship."

A look of savage relief came over Hansen's features. We all grinned. Except Sails. He continued to be dark and sullen and resentful. Maybe he thought of the wild notions we had spouted when we thought our fortunes were made.

We completed arrangements to visit Thomas and then went back to bed. If anybody had ever told me I could sleep with a rajah's fortune within walking distance, I'd have thought he was crazy.

Four days later our heads were clear, our spirits restored, and our hearts normal. We were oriented. I found Hansen eating in the main saloon. Costigan and Akeley followed me in. Hansen sat back and studied us while we were satisfying our hunger.

"Watch out for Sails and Thomas," he said at last. "This is going to end in a fight."

"I don't like trickery," Akeley objected. "Why can't we talk with Thomas first?"

"And spill our hand?" Hansen snapped. "Look, we got here safely and know where the teklite is, and with luck, we'll get back. We can own the world." He gave us a hard, ruthless look. "Or we can be suckers and end in a poorhouse."

We were all scowling, and avoiding each other's gaze. We wanted to be decent, but we wanted to be rich, too. And scientists do get some screwball ideas about the unimportance of money. Again Hansen was smart. He just left the matter hanging.

We started out for Thomas' ship and marched through a maddening green glare and endless muck for five hourse.

We found Thomas aboard his small ship, mixing something in a retort. I think he had forgotten we were on Venus. But he was glad to see us. He bustled around getting us some hot drinks, made with real Earth whisky.

Hansen began studying the work Thomas was doing. He knew what the experiment was, much to the surprise of the scientists, and the two fell into a discussion of metallurgy. Sails maintained a jealous silence.

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LATER, Thomas led the way outside and fished the ring of a trap door out of the mud. We followed him down a long ramp into dank underground vaults which, he explained with embarrassment, he had originally built upon the surface. In five years, they had sunk from sight.

The room was constructed of some strange alloy with a fiery russet glow. The floor was spongy, a rubberoid product he had made out of Venusian lichens. He nodded toward a large power plant.

"That armature is gravium alloy," he said casually.

Costigan nearly choked. The material of that plant, on Earth, would be worth probably a half billion dollars.

"But this was my greatest achievement," Thomas boomed with pride, gesturing at racks of large-sized hose. "I refined that rubber from the local lichens."

Hansen looked over the pumps and hose with a grim satisfaction. They were miner's pumps, tough and built for service.

"I could come over and help," Thomas suggested uncertainly.

I studied him. Suddenly I realized that, incredible as it seemed, he thought we might consider him useless—in the way!

"You've just begun those experiments to reduce production costs of gravium, Professor," Sails cut in, giving us a glance of mocking amusement. "The professor thinks every home should have its own atomic power plant."

Costigan stared. Akeley's lips twitched. Hansen's jaw grew hard. We all had the same thought. If we controlled all the atomic power, we could run the world, but not with an atomic furnace in every cellar.

Thomas sighed. "Yes, I had forgotten the experiments. But you boys will have great fun getting that teklite out and smelted."

Thomas lent us his tractor, an amazing machine which apparently could not be overloaded. We hooked on twelve large sledges of pumping apparatus and the tractor dragged them up the ramp without a shiver. We rode back to our ship in style.

When we were aboard, Hansen emitted a harsh chuckle.

"Boys, I have an idea the professor thinks we just came out here for the ride!" he said. "An atomic furnace in every home, eh?"

Akeley's teeth snapped together. "I'm not risking my life for glory. I came to make my fortune." He glowered at Hansen. "Whatever you're thinking, I'll bet it's plain rotten."

"If about fifty billion dollars is rotten, that's it." Hansen laughed again but his face looked plenty tough.

Nobody said anything more. I think we all know we'd follow whatever diabolical scheme he hatched. But none of us liked it.

CHAPTER III

"We'll Own the Earth!"

WITHOUT giving us a hint of what he planned, Hansen rooted us out for the start of the real work. He stood at the end of the ward room, tough and dynamic and with a sinister flame burning in his eyes.

"Men, we've got the dirtiest piece of mining human beings have ever tackled, and almost no equipment for the job," he growled. "We're going to work till we're ready to drop. Then we're going to work some more. Maybe we'll curse and hate each other. Yet when it's over, we can sit around for the rest of our lives. We'll own the Earth."

He put his own spirit into us. He had our hands itching to get at that raw teklite. We could hardly wait to plod back over that ridge and wallow in the muck.

It was dirty, heart-breaking work in that desolate, depressive green light. It took four days of sopping hell to build the guide line. Angle posts wouldn't hold. We had to make conical drain foundations for each post. We floated them as we would buoys. We lost tools and masks. Even a foot of wire was precious.

We grew used to dead, weary muscles, aching lungs, pounding hearts, and sore, running eyes. Every night we threw wet clothes into a drying room, bathed, ate and staggered off to bed. After a few days we didn't bathe so often. Finally Reese tried to drop into his bunk still dressed in wet clothes. Hansen kicked him out and tore the clothes from his back. Not for Reese's sake. He needed manpower and couldn't risk Reese becoming ill.

Hansen himself anchored the last post. Then he stood silent, staring at the writhing fog.

"Tomorrow we break ground," he said. "Every man bathe, wash and dry his clothes tonight."

We tramped back along the guide line, like grotesque phantoms in that swirling, silent mist. I knew what it had cost Hansen to say, "Tomorrow." He was quivering to get into that wet hole and tear the first chunk of teklite from Venus.

At mess, he suddenly stared around him. "Where's Costigan and Reese?" he demanded.

Nobody had noticed their absence, but now everybody knew where they were. They had stayed out at the mine hole.

Hansen turned purple with anger.

Just then the inner hatch banged open. Costigan stumbled in, shedding mud with every lurch. As he cast loose his oxygen

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mask, I saw his face was scarlet. He carried a small lump to the table, dumped it with a thud, and sluiced it clean with a pot of coffee. It showed up a dull, mottled, purple-green, shot with streaks of topaz.

During that instant of dead silence, I thought Hansen would strike him dead.

"Teklite!" Costigan rasped. "At the four foot level."

Hansen reached out and grabbed the chunk, his fury changed into surprise. He had to strain to move the heavy ore. By an effort he lifted it, and his face grew gray. His eyes were like slits of fire, as if he had high fever.

"Forty pounds!" he breathed.

We had known gravium was heavy. Its density was 37.8, five times heavier than iron. But feeling it was fantastic. Senses refused to credit the enormous weight.

One by one that small chunk of ore was snatched from hand to hand. At first we babbled. Then we fell silent, as the ore made the rounds. Every rich metal casts its own special spell and fever, but I have never known such a blazing urge as that teklite cast.

"The first pick after we cleared sludge," Costigan exclaimed. "There's billions there."

I don't remember moving or racing out through that shivery green fog and mile and a half of muck. Only vaguely can I recall how we found Reese half drowned, but raving wildly and refusing to let go of a large chunk of ore too big to lift. Hansen laid him out cold with one smash of his heavy fist and plunged into that hole. Shouting like madmen, we all followed him.

My first clear recollection is back in the ship, sitting with a clean chunk of teklite in my hands and staring at it. I kept hefting the ore, unable to believe its weight, fascinated by its color. I remember thinking over and over like an idiot, "It's mine—all mine!" and being carried away with something akin to exultation.

HANSEN came in finally, forearm streaming blood but with the craziest grin I have ever seen. Grim, ruthless rapacity seemed to beat out of him in waves. He went into the galley and returned, rubbing something in a towel. Carefully, he laid the object down. It clanked. He ripped off the towel and we stared at a nugget of softly glowing green, no larger than a pea.

"That is real gravium, boys," he said from deep in the chest. "That nugget weighs a good eight pounds."

We stared at the nugget with fascination. Sixteen million dollars was lying there, scarcely bigger than a stickpin. It made the idea of our fortunes clear to us as nothing had up to now. The same thought ran through every head. We could get back to Earth and every man would literally be a king. Or we could go back as great five-day wonders, and give our treasure to humanity, and wind up forgotten in some poorhouse with other explorers and scientists of the past.

Hansen looked around the circle of faces and spoke thick tones.

"There it is, boys," he said. "Now you know. We can go back and make the world kick in at our price. Or we can let Thomas give it gravium at fifty bucks an ounce."

Deval licked fevered lips. "What's your plan?"

"We form a miners' syndicate," Hansen growled. "That leaves Sails out. We can elect to pay him off in stock instead of a share of gravium."

Costigan grunted. "What about Thomas?"

I didn't like the expression I saw in Hansen's eyes. I looked away, but some of the same ugly wickedness was eating inside of me like an acid.

"We'll worry about Thomas later," Hansen rasped.

"I hate a doublecross," Akeley objected.

Hansen rolled the nugget clanking down the table.

"Do you hate it more than what you could get with this, Akeley?" he asked softly.

There was no answer. The souls of many men have been bartered for less. Hansen brought out a syndicate agreement and we all signed. It contained no reference whatever of Thomas, and nobody mentioned his name or rights again. None of us wanted to think of the limits to which we might go.

The lust to posses that raw naked teklite drove us like a drug. For two days we trudged through the endless mud carrying supplies. We built two work platforms and they sank into the slime. The third one, perched on barrels, like a raft, stayed precariously afloat. Then one corner went down and, our equipment followed, and we spent three miserable days digging them out of the oozing muck. A sledge or drill was too precious to be abandoned.

Dissension and despondency were gripping us on the day when Sampson devised a corrugated iron platform, like a keeled raft, which held steady. It helped, but no more could be built. We needed every inch of material left for bracing and the smelter.

Suddenly Reese broke into tears.

"We'll never be able to mine here," he blubbered.

Hansen turned black with rage.

"Nature hasn't made the place that I can't mine," he roared. But there was a shadow of grim doubt forming in his eyes.

We went over to see Thomas again, sipping his brew while he finished some tests. Again

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I noticed Hansen's face lose that wolfish look and fill with interest in the work.

"What's the stress differential at ten below Fahrenheit, for internal and external components?" he asked Thomas.

The scientist looked at him with thoughtful surprise.

"I hadn't thought of that angle, Hansen. To a constructor, it would be most important, of course."

"Plastics are licking the pants off metals," Hansen said. "Somebody's got to put metals back where they belong."

He looked at Sails as if he would like to fight about it.

Thomas turned back to his tests with a quiet grin.

"I didn't know you were interested in metallurgy—beyond what you could get out of a mine, Hansen."

The miner gave a grim laugh. "I was an iron puddler at fourteen. A form tester two years later. I lost my father and two brothers because they couldn't control gasses on high grade steel."

"If we get gravium down cheap enough, we can make a better steel than tungsten at twenty dollars per ton," Thomas remarked.

FOR a second, something sparked in Hansen's eyes. Then the spark dimmed and he looked cold and ruthless. A lot of things could happen if gravium were cheap enough. But Hansen running the world would not be interested.

"There are enough new minerals up here, to set up an entire supplementary and basic metals industry on Venus," the scientist went on. "If somebody would locate them."

Akeley shot him a glance of interest, looked thoughtful, then snorted to himself.

"How did you get your spaceship off with just rockets before, Professor?" he asked curiously.

Thomas laughed. "This ship isn't an airplane, Akeley. No, I'm afraid rockets would not be enough. I have a small catapult spring, however, and the two together just about do it."

Akeley and Hansen exchanged glances, and something cold and dark and malignant seemed to be born within that room. I saw Hansen's face, and the expression on it belonged to a stone gargoyle.

In the days following, the ruthless drive for fortune crystallized within us, but it was running a race against the mounting depression of the atmosphere. Men turned surly and cooperation became a myth. Three times when strikes were made, the pump men deserted their posts in the wild rush to get down to the actual ore. The tunnels were flooded in those few minutes, and Fabray was trapped and nearly drowned.

On the twenty-fourth day, the fogs cleared like morning mist. We stared and then leaped and yelled. Thomas must have been wrong! The evil of that dank planet lifted from our hearts. Dinner that day was almost sociable. We discussed a runway for our ultimate take-off. We drew blueprints for cracking plant and blast furnace.

The ore was assaying rich—twelve and fifteen per cent. With our crude methods we would be lucky to free .05 per cent of gravium, but at that, we would be fabulously wealthy. We got drunk thinking about it, and discussed some pretty fantastic ideas.

In the morning we awakened stiff and cold. A soft purr sounded steadily outside. Green-tinted rain was falling slowly. We looked at it and literally turned sick.

I followed Hansen out, wondering where all the water on Venus drained to. Maybe it didn't drain! That was our terrible fear.

The drifts were constantly flooded now. Thomas built six additional pumps, but they clogged and needed constant attention. We worked in soupy, sulphurous muck up to our waists. Our lungs and hearts began to develop ailments.

There was a knife fight between Deval and Reese, and Hansen prevented murder only by slugging them both with a pick handle. Deval lapsed into sullen silence. Three days later there was a peculiar slide at the end of Drift Six and Deval climbed out of the hole with a grim satisfaction on his face. Reese never came out. Suspicion of each other ran through us like a prairie fire.

None of the drifts were any longer safe. We dug in for a twenty-foot maximum. Our footings turned to rushing streams. The ceilings dripped like sieves and dropped off in chunks. We literally fought that planet for a few pounds of ore.

At the end of wet, grueling days there was the long pull back through the sucking mire of the plateau and the fear of the man who walked behind. We jumped at unexpected noises or the sight of our shadows. The last of our morale had vanished. The expedition was breaking up under the shadow of the lust for wealth and power.

CHAPTER IV

Venusian Triumph

GREEN rain pattered over Venus with its crazing rhythm. The brash green light came through a port and put its tints and shadows upon Hansen's rough-hewn face, making him look unholy.

"We need Sails to navigate back to Earth."

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Hansen said with diabolical calm. "But he is insane the moment we land. We stick together on that."

There were harsh mutters of assent. Akeley emitted a vicious, mirthless sound of laughter.

"And we leave Hugo Thomas marooned here," he said. "That's murder."

"Call it what you like, "Hansen growled. "There is no other way. Those experiments of his would drop gravium to fifty or a hundred dollars per ounce." He lighted a cigarette. "When we get things in hand on Earth, we can send a rescue expedition."

I looked out at that terrible green rain. There were limits to human endurance, even for a man wrapped up in science. No person who had been there five years could stand much more alone.

Hansen's voice came softly and dangerously as a snake. "Is there any man not tough enough for this?"

No one answered. Murder is not pleasant, but it is less unpleasant than being killed.

"All right," Hansen said with finality. "That clears the air. We are working against time and don't forget it. We're going to build a furnace and smelter right at the mine and it's going to take every ounce of stamina we've got." His lips pulled back against his teeth in a wicked smile. "Just remember that leaving Thomas' weight behind makes room for a lot more gravium in the ship."

That was the size of it and fear and suspicion corroded in us. But we worked. Glumly, we ate and pulled on coats and clumped out into the rain day after day.

The mire of the plateau, oddly, had not become deeper. But the water atop of it had. It was up to our thighs in places. For three days now there had been noticeable currents on the plateau.

Moving supplies for the cracking plant and furnace would have been a one-day job on dry land. It took us three weeks. We kept losing our footing. Supplies were wet and skidded from numbed hands. We had to dive below water and fish them up by touch, clawing through that cold mud by inches. There was real current in the water now.

Men shivered and coughed and cursed the rain. But, stumbling with fatigue, we began to build. Costigan came in with the report that there was river current at the north end of the plateau and the water was up four inches at the mine. Only Hansen's ruthless drive took us through that. He beat us through as herdsmen beat horses through a storm.

We had a meeting and it is good no artist was there to catch the picture. We looked like a circle of haunted maniacs. Even Hansen was down to skin and bone.

"We'll have to call in Sails and Thomas," he said.

Akeley's lips jerked in a vicious way. "It's dangerous," he warned. "All of us are talking to ourselves. They'll stumble onto our plan."

Hansen looked at him with eyes like agates. "We need their manpower. And men with some innards."

He said that for the rest of us, but the shame had small effect.

The water had cut a channel between the two ships, and now the current was boiling away in a green lather. Hansen sent the men to work and took me with him. We went afoot, breasting a flood up to our chests. Swimming the current was the most terrible moment of my life.

Thomas blinked at us with his usual air of having forgotten we were on the planet.

"Sixty-five days!" he repeated. "Incredible! I should have come over. But these experiments made me forget."

Hansen roused from his tight sullenness. "Any luck on those tensile tests?" he asked.

Thomas beamed. "Great luck. The internal and external stress remains the same under all temperatures. I think with time we could perfect a metal impervious to temperature and weather."

Hansen was tired. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"I'd like to own that process," he said almost dreamily.

"Why not?" Thomas answered. "You're a good promoter. Well, we'll have plenty of time to discuss it in the next three years."

HANSEN'S eyes opened and he came slowly forward in his seat.

"Why three years?"

Thomas chuckled. "You don't intend to take off next summer and land on Jupiter do you?"

Hansen turned gray around the lips.

"I don't get this."

Thomas looked at his protégé sharply.

"Sails, didn't you tell these men that their last chance to take off for Earth is in twenty-one days or they'll miss the angle of conjunction?"

Sails darkened sullenly and made a lame excuse. Thomas looked shocked. He made a gesture.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew and planned to stay." Something boyish and wistful came into his green face. "It is not very pleasant, but there is fascinating work to be done here."

Hansen was staring out at the greenish glare and softly gurgling waters. His lips formed the words, "Three years!" His big, tough figure was trembling. But he did not crack.

We waited a period of light and then made that grueling trip back to our ship. We ate

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and rested and then struggled again to the ridge. We stumbled into the cracking shed dead weary.

"Well, we got the furnace hooked up and enough power to smelt all the gravium we can carry," Fabray said almost cheerfully. "But it will be slow work."

"I'll take an ounce for my share and be satisfied," Deval snarled. "I'd give one arm to get off for Earth today."

Hansen gave a harsh laugh. "You'll be waiting just three years, mister. Sails outsmarted us."

Men stopped and stood like carven statues. The patter on the roof seemed to swell into a deafening roar. Deval was holding the first test of gravium, a small bit worth a hundred thousand dollars. He dropped it and it sank instantly into the floor.

Hansen looked at the circle of drawn faces. If hysteria once started, it would sweep us like a prairie fire. The whole crowd of us might become raving maniacs.

Hansen cursed everything in hell and the cosmos. Then he actually laughed.

"Well, nothing ever licked me yet except this gravium," he said. "We've got twenty-one days to build a runway and by jumping Jinks, we'll build it! We'll get off from here if we have to rocket the planet away from us."

"Leave without gravium?" Akeley quavered.

The muscles bulged along Hansen's neck.

"Thomas has one hundred pounds refined in his vaults," he snarled.

"Hansen, you can't do that," I yelled. "Not that and the other too."

He gave me an inscrutable look.

"Just let me worry about what I'm going to do," he said.

We slogged back to our ship and found Sails and Thomas there. The scientist looked us over with concern. Morbid despondency had almost reduced us all to wrecks.

"Hansen, you must get the ship off at once. Your men can't last three years."

Hansen's lips flattened in a mirthless grin. He had been figuring since his outburst of belligerent optimism, and he had discovered a new difficulty. We needed a full mile runway at least, but against the pull of that water we would need a much stronger catapult than the one we had.

"How about using my catapult?" Thomas suggested. "Triple strength and now I've coated it with gravium."

Hansen's lips gave a queer jerk.

"Somebody has to release that spring. Suppose we draw lots."

Odd wistfulness came into Thomas' eyes. The mere thought of Earth was like a lovely dream after five long years.

"No, that won't be necessary," he said, promptly. "You're Earth men. Your interests are down there. Much work remains to be done here. Since I'm nothing but an old scientist, maybe it's just as well I stay. I'll release the spring."

Every eye in that room riveted on him. Remember, this was the man we meant to maroon—whom we had thought we would have to murder! Now, voluntarily, he was solving our problem and sending us on our way!

A smile flitted over Thomas' lips.

"Yes, there'll be plenty of working here between mining, smelting, exploring and laboratory experiments. Mostly, I think, I will miss cigars."

AKELEY looked at him sharply, then at Hansen, then at Fabray. Hansen glowered at his feet.

"All right, let's go," he said suddenly.

If that gravium fever had been wild, it was not comparable to the tough drive this new fever goaded us into. We set madly to wheeling the great ship through the clinging mud and up onto that little ridge. It was an impossible job but we did it. When we dropped of exhaustion, Hansen came and kicked more energy into us. He did ten men's work himself.

The water was rising swiftly now. The currents grew. The gurgling became a hideous growl in our ears. Men slept sometimes on their feet, and came to and rushed back to handle cold wet metal with desperate determination.

Ruggedly, Thomas worked beside Hansen. His hands were raw from erecting the great catapult and raising that mile-long runway of wet muck. On the last day he took the tractor to his ship. He came back towing his special catapult spring and teamed it up with ours. We tested our rockets and stood there to say goodby. We were even too tired to remember the scientist's gravium.

Except, maybe, Hansen. There was a strange look in his eyes.

"This leaves you stuck here—forever, maybe," he said. "It will be blasted lonesome."

Thomas shrugged. "An old man, already past use. Probably another expedition will come along, equipped now with your knowledge." He picked a small package out of his tractor with some effort. "The gravium I had refined," he explained. "I want ten per cent of this to go to Sails to be used strictly for experimental purposes. The rest is yours to sell."

Costigan stared. "At what price?"

"Why, for what you can get, of course," Thomas said with surprise.

Akeley scowled. "But you were talking about fifty dollars an ounce."

"Oh!" Thomas muttered. He looked away

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into the dreary green rain. "Maybe in a century or two. If we had miners here and a transport service established."

The hour of visibility was passing in its strange way. Not the slightest change of light. It was merely that figures receded swiftly from sight.

"Into the ship, now, all of you!" Thomas ordered, crisply.

His tone was the only sign I detected of how desperately he hated this parting. He clapped Sails on the back and pushed him toward the gangway. A cheer floated over his head. Figures were hard to discern even at arm's length now.

The port closed. There was a roar of the rockets and their red tongues lashed out through the blanket of pea soup rain. At the foot of the catapult the scientist stood with water swirling around his knees and his bared head lifted toward the ship. Both rocket ports blasted out their fierce, deafening retort. The tower strained.

Thomas waited until the last moment of stress and pulled the release chain. The ship leaped, dipped, skimmed down its wet runway, and at the very end, caught airway and was off. Behind it, the water parted from the fierce rocket blast. A brief second and the ship's red tails had vanished in grim murk.

Thomas clung to the catapult while waves tore against his legs. The water quieted and he stood there watching the place where the ship had disappeared.

The gurgle of the waters probably sounded very lonely now.

"Well, there's work," he murmured to himself.

"A lot of it, before they come back." Hansen's chuckle sounded like a dying whisper note, out of the gobbling rain.

Thomas wheeled around. "Hansen! What are you doing here?"

"Bosh! You've got to have somebody to mine your metals," he said.

Akeley's metallic mocking chuckle came from across the platform.

"You don't think you're man enough to locate them, too, Hansen?"

"And smelt 'em?" Fabray demanded, forming as a dark shadow in the rain. "Why he thinks a smelter is a fish, Professor!"

"I wouldn't trust a one of 'em, doc!" Costigan's voice sounded. "They aim to rob you of your few cigars."

Then I came out, too, and grinned at Thomas. All of us stood around and laughed. I don't believe any of us knew the others had hidden out in that shrouding cloak of invisibility. Men are funny about getting caught at anything decent when they've been trying hard to play tough.

Thomas had the tractor which was radio-compass equipped.

"Well, gentlemen, we'll give that next space party a real surprise," "In the meantime, I invite you all to a tasty Venusian dinner. Something I rather pride myself upon—baked lichens stuffed with canned beef!"

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE DISCIPLINARY CIRCUIT

A Novelet of the Era of Perfection

By MURRAY LEINSTER

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

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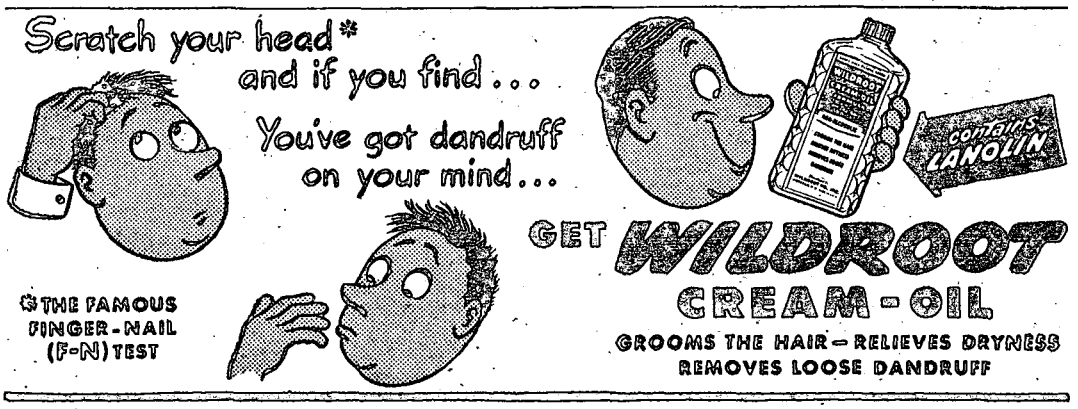

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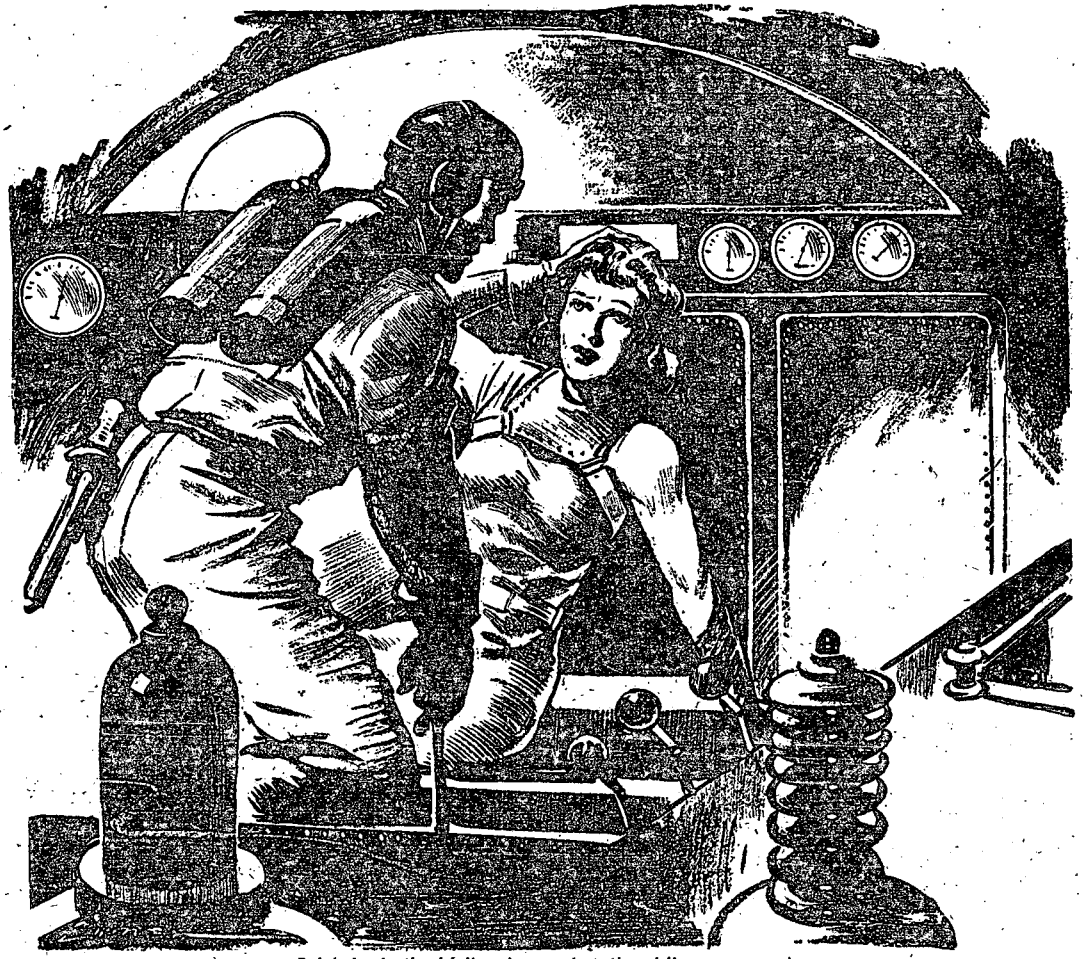

Ralph knelt thankfully when at last the girl's eyes opened

INTERLINK

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

When a mental phenomenon causes his fiancée to be a space pirate, Ralph Dale must save her from the firing squad!

AS SHE gazed at the towering cathedrals of light tracing the outlines of the vast Twenty-second Century city, there were many thoughts in the mind of Elna Haydon—troubled thoughts chiefly, which even the anticipation of the impending meeting with Ralph could not entirely dispel. They were thoughts too deep for analysis by herself alone—she needed to exchange them with somebody she could fully trust.

At a creamy orange streak in the sky she glanced up, watching that giant S pattern as it rode down through the heavens towards the center of the city.

Ralph Dale of the Interplanetary Police brought his machine down at police headquarters as fast as prudence allowed. After making his routine report, he hurried out to the airbus station.

His mind was centered on one thing only—the gray-eyed, blonde-haired girl who spent her working hours as an electrotype

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operator in the Federated World Bank—and her evenings with him.

They were simple folk, both of them, supplying their tiny share to the vast backdrop of human industry which kept New York as the hub of the Western Hemisphere's industrial power.

Ralph chafed impatiently as the airbus chugged its way over the caverns of ground radiance where traffic came and went—until at last it brought him to the stop he wanted. He hurried along the bright boulevard, smiling as he saw Elna waiting for him with outstretched hand.

"Ralph dearest, at last! I'm so glad!"

He kissed her gently. His keen eyes searched her face in the floodlights. He had not been slow to notice the almost fervent relief in her voice at his arrival.

"Something wrong?" he asked quietly, as they sat down on a form.

"You've noticed?" She smiled faintly as he nodded.

Then for a moment she looked out over the city and pondered. Her voice was deadly quiet when she spoke again.

"I don't understand what *is* wrong, Ralph! Whether I'm weak-willed or—oh, I don't really know how to explain it!"

"Can't be illness of the body," he said. "It's unknown in these days."

"Illness of the mind then. It has happened several times recently—an almost uncontrollable urge to do wild, reckless things. So far I've kept a tight hold on myself, but today—Ralph, I'm getting afraid for myself! I even begin to wonder if I am going insane!"

"How absurd!"

He smiled and gripped her arm reassuringly. Her gray eyes searched his face.

"Today, Ralph, I nearly murdered Cranfell, the chief cashier of my department!"

He started.

"You—*what?*"

"*There!* I told you it's serious. And I did it for no reason!"

Ralph was silent for a time. When he spoke, he spoke hesitantly.

"In the Eugenic Record of your family is there any strange characteristic ascribed to your parents?"

"None. And they couldn't have been granted a marriage license if there had been. Nor is there anything in the personal records of dad or mother to explain it. They both died normal deaths—except perhaps dad. He hurried his end because of the strain he put on himself with space explorations."

"Didn't you once say you were born in space?" Ralph asked.

"I was—yes—on dad's exploration ship. He and mother went almost everywhere together. Does it signify?"

"I don't suppose it does. I was merely thinking that space radiations produce queer effects on the brain of a newly born child sometimes, effects which do not become apparent until later life."

The girl sighed.

"Whatever it is I neither like it nor understand it." With a sudden effort she aroused herself. "Oh, let's forget the whole business! How about a show?"

"Now you're talking!" Ralph exclaimed, and caught her arm as she rose beside him.

BUT whatever it was that was affecting Elna must have recurred. The following afternoon Ralph received the stunning news that she had murdered Cranfell, the chief cashier, and then escaped into space in a one-man machine, even though she had never piloted one in her life before!

To Ralph it was all so motiveless, so unreasonable—and the more futile efforts there were made to find her, the more worried he became. He would not—could not—believe the story then in general circulation that the girl was a murderess.

A police dragnet was out for her, of course. But Elna a killer? No! It was preposterous.

A month went by, then there began to drift in from space a series of extraordinary stories—tales of a daring girl pirate who plundered private and commercial craft plying the ways. She murdered without question, too, when necessary.

In fact her reckless deeds were so outstanding that they took precedence over the similar exploits of Delka, a young renegade Martian who seemed to have come into prominence about the same time. Actually there was a surprising parallel between his actions and the girl's.

Then one day a radio-color photograph reached Interplanetary headquarters from space. Ralph Dale's face darkened when he saw it. It was Elna beyond doubt—cold and brazen—nothing like the quiet girl he had known and deeply loved.

"Well?" asked the Chief briefly, as he saw Ralph studying the photograph. "Is it as you thought? Is it the girl you knew?"

"Yes. It is she."

"I must remind you that you belong to the Interplanetary Police, Dale. No personal considerations must be allowed to stand in the way of your duty."

"You can rest assured, sir. The girl I knew was a quiet, hard-working, decent citizeness. I can't explain her about-face, unless her father's love of exploration is in her blood and has suddenly taken this form. The mechanism of heredity, you know. Then there is another angle—"

Ralph stopped, thinking of what the girl had told him of her strange mental aberrations. Perhaps that had been alibi talk.

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"Well?" the Chief asked again.

"Nothing; just a thought which occurred to me. Ralph clenched his fist. "Rely on me, Chief—I'll bring her in if it is the last thing I do—if only in revenge for the way she stood me up. Maybe she only pretended to love me so she could figure out the inside workings of the I.P."

Ralph saluted and went out swiftly, heading across the grounds to his space flyer. He made his usual routine check-up of fuel, guns and provisions. Then he was off on his journey.

It was a trip which spread into a week before he discovered anything. Then as he was cruising idly at the halfway line between Earth and Mars he caught a glimpse of a vessel ahead of him. His space-reflector showed it had no recognizable insignia.

Instantly he set the rockets going full blast and swept towards the unknown vessel with ever-mounting speed. He had come within shooting range when his radio burst into life.

"Come a yard nearer and I'll blast you!"

Ralph stared at the loudspeaker. Somewhere in the cold, biting tones of that voice he recognized Elna.

"If you do," he replied curtly, "I shall open fire in reprisal. This is a police machine and heavily armed. I think you've more sense than to try anything. I'll give you ten seconds to surrender!"

Ralph looked at the chronometer and waited. It was exactly 3:00 p.m., Earth Standard Time. The second hand flicked round steadily.

Then suddenly there came from the girl's ship a hail of high-velocity bullets. Ralph heard them rattle on the thick skin of his machine, but they did not penetrate. Instantly he set the rockets going, swung round and dived.

Within seconds he was level with the girl's ship, anchored himself to it with magnetic grapples. To his surprise there was no further sign of attack. He waited in grim expectancy—but still nothing happened. At last he turned to the microphone again.

"I'm coming aboard! One trick and it will be my duty to shoot you. I shall use your emergency lock."

Still there was no answer, nor could he hear any sign of movement through the speaker. It was a surprising development, one which smelled of trickery. He got into his spacesuit quickly. Raygun in hand, he climbed out to the roof of his machine. In a few minutes he had reached the emergency lock of the girl's vessel—emergency in that it could be opened from the outside.

HE SPUN off the screw clamps, lifted the cover and dropped it back gently behind him as he descended the ladder. Still all was quiet, nor was there any indication of life in the narrow steel corridor leading to the control room.

Gun leveled, he went forward, pushed the control room door open with his foot and stepped back to wait a volley. Nothing came. Cautiously he peered inside, then gave a start. The girl was sprawled face down on the floor, apparently unconscious.

It only took him a few minutes to discover that this was not play acting. She was dead out, and it took him ten minutes to revive her. Then she opened her eyes slowly.

"Ralph!" Her voice was only a whisper. "Ralph, what are you doing here?" Sitting up, she stared about her. "What on earth—where *am* I?"

"It won't do, Elna," Ralph said seriously.

"Won't do? *What* won't?" She looked at him with wide eyes. "Honestly, dearest, I don't know what's happened. The last thing I recall is being at the desk in my office—then I went dizzy or something. I suppose I must have fainted. The next thing I remember was you bending over me. What's *happened?* Are we in space?"

Ralph looked at her for a long minute. Then he took her hands firmly and held them.

"I'd like to believe this, Elna," he said quietly, "but unfortunately the law only believes in facts, and my orders are to bring in the girl pirate who has several murders to account for."

"You're—you're not talking about me, are you?"

"Yes—you. It's been going on for two months now."

She gazed at him in such utter bewilderment he realized he had better explain in detail. When he had finished, she was pale with shock.

"Yes, yes—I believe it," she said slowly. "Remember when I told you I thought I was going crazy? I can't think what has controlled me in the interval but it is quite obvious that I haven't been my own mistress."

She clutched Ralph's arm tightly.

"Dearest, you've got to help me somehow! Say that you will! Please!"

"I'll do what I can," he replied. "As a private individual I'll do all I can to help you in court, and I'll dig up all the facts possible. But as a police officer I have to arrest you and take you back."

"I'm ready," she said quietly. "Let's go."

The praise Ralph Dale received for bringing in the girl did not stir him in the least. He was deeply troubled, ready to seize on the slenderest clue to help prove her innocence at the approaching trial.

The Chief could hardly be blamed for having no sympathy for Elna. To him, she was

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simply a cold-blooded murderess, deserving of all she would surely get. In fact, so satisfied was he with Ralph's capture of her that he assigned to him the task of also trying to bring to justice the notorious Delka, renegade of Mars.

Ralph took the report of Delka's activities as graciously as possible, set himself to study it out and, between whiles, try to think of some way to save Elna.

The most recent report on Delka was from Minrod of the Martian Interplanetary Police, who had been close enough to the pirate in a running fight to fire a long-period anesthetic shell through the emergency lock.

But even so, though unconscious, the Martian had still eluded him. Robot controls on his ship had carried him away swiftly to parts unknown. True, he would be unconscious for some time even yet—but somewhere, either in space or in a secret hideout, he was there for the picking up.

"What a hope!" Ralph grunted and tossed the record on one side. Then, its details slowly crystalizing in his mind, he picked it up again and studied the list of events once more.

It was remarkable, but there was almost an exact parallel between Delka's activities and Elna's. His piratical career had begun about the same time as hers, and—

Hurriedly Ralph pulled out the report on Elna, which he had been handed before he had set out to capture her. His heart began to race a little.

She had held up ships and murdered people at almost exactly the same Earth Standard Time as Delka. Most important of all, the hour at which Delka had collapsed from the anesthetic shell coincided exactly with Elna's unexplained faint aboard her machine —3:00 p.m., Earth Standard Time!

Ralph sat motionless, thinking. Then he rose from his corner of the rest room and hurried to the Chief's office.

THE Chief was a good listener, but he was unconvinced.

"I take it, Dale, that you are trying to prove some kind of hypnotism on the part of Delka. Is that it? Hypnotism by a Martian over an Earth girl whom he has never seen."

"Not hypnotism, Chief—schizophrenia! Or split personality if you prefer it."

"Schizophrenia, eh? But how do you account for split personality over *two* people?"

"Did you ever hear of twin souls?" Ralph asked tensely.

"Between Earthly twins, yes. But certainly not between Martian and Earthling. It isn't possible, man! They both belong to different planets, and they're opposite sexes."

"That doesn't concern me," Ralph said. "There *is* a connection somewhere, and I've got to find it!"

"Forget it! Your job is to find Delka and bring him in."

"Overlook Delka for the moment, Chief. My interest is in the fact that from the exact hour Delka was gassed into a long term unconsciousness, Elna has resumed her normal personality! I'll swear that isn't just coincidence!"

The Chief's expression changed, and he rubbed his jaw pensively.

"No," he admitted, "it doesn't seem as though it can be. Well, I know how you feel about this girl—so, within limits, what do you want to do?"

"I want full authority to search her apartment."

"Okay. I don't see it can do any harm. She's on trial for murder and piracy, so anything is legal. All right, go to it."

"Thanks!" Ralph said gratefully. "And in the meantime, as a special favor to me, don't assign anybody else to the Delka case. I'll probably need to bring him in myself before I'm through. The moment I know something I'll pass on the news to you."

With that he hurried off, arriving at Elna's apartment half an hour later. For a long time he searched in vain, then at last discovered the wall safe behind an innocent-looking picture. The papers inside, chiefly legal documents, conveyed nothing of interest—but the black, hide-bound book incribed *Record of Martian Excursion, 2116,* was a very different matter.

It took Ralph only a few minutes to discover that it was the log book of Ronald Haydon, Elna's father, complete in every detail from the day of his first voyage to the end of the trip.

Presently his hurried reading brought him to entries which interested him deeply—

January 7. Today I am the proud father of a daughter!

January 9. A terrible thing has happened! Today I have been involved in a fight with a wandering Martian. The battle ended indecisively, but with tragedy as the outcome. The Martian and his wife escaped hurt, as did my dearest too—but our respective children have both suffered severe head injuries—reaction from the blast rays, I think. What am I to do? I cannot bear the thought of losing her. . . .

January 10. I have come to an arrangement with the Martian. We are agreed that our two children cannot be allowed to become the victims of our personal hatred. I have decided to use my surgical skill, such as it is, to save my daughter and the Martian boy. Both of them have sustained brain injuries. I hope to God I shall succeed!

January 11. I have succeeded! It has been a dangerous operation. Oddly enough, the left frontal lobe of my daughter's brain has been

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damaged, and the *right* frontal lobe of the Martian. By grafting part to part, from one brain to the other, and replacing the loss with synthetic material, I believe I have created ganglia and synapses which will be fully adequate. In each brain, there is a part belonging to the other, but I cannot foresee any trouble in later life since they inhabit different worlds.

January 22. The operation has been completely successful! Elna, as we shall christen our daughter when we return to Earth, is well on the road to recovery, and a recent radio message from the Martian somewhere in the void assures me that his son has also nearly recovered. We have become real friends. I wonder if we shall meet again? I doubt it.

Ralph lowered the log book slowly, then skimmed through the remaining pages. They contained interesting facts, but none so interesting as the information he had already gleaned. He stood up finally, put the book away, then hurried out of the apartment.

HIS next call was at the surgery of Dr. Drayton Grimshaw, the city's foremost brain surgeon and specialist. Ralph soon put him in possession of the facts.

"Well?" Ralph asked. "Do you believe a kinship is at all possible?"

"It's hard to say," Grimshaw answered slowly. "It has been my experience till now that a mental kinship is only possible between twins, and is particularly apparent in the case of the bodies being bonded at birth —Siamese fashion. But here we have a case of two utterly different planets and breeds. So, despite the brain portions being shared between them I cannot see—"

"Oh, this is absurd!" Ralph interruped impatiently. "The whole thing is as plain as day —even to my untutored knowledge. Look here, would you be prepared to testify in court that a mental link is possible?"

"Well—yes, but not with any conviction, I'm afraid."

"That's all I want to know." Ralph got to his feet. "You'll be summoned when the time comes, and thanks very much."

Thereafter he headed straight for the prison and was permitted to see the girl and impart his good news. She listened to him in obvious amazement.

"But, Ralph, do you think that really *is* the explanation? Do you believe that that experience my father had with the Martian could possibly—oh, I just can't credit it! I've read of that surgical operation in dad's notes, of course, but I can't see how it could affect me now that I'm a grown woman. You'd think it would have appeared when I was a child."

"I contend that there is no other explanation for your behavior," Ralph said firmly. "Everything fits in. Even if it doesn't in places, it is your one chance to escape a charge of murder and piracy. In court, you must support the idea in every possible way."

She nodded slowly.

"All right—I will."

Ralph gripped her hands.

"Hang on," he smiled. "You'll make out all right in the end—even if I have to shift the universe to do it!"

To Ralph's horror, though, the girl reverted back again to her icy role of a female pirate and killer on the very day of the trial. In court, he heard her swear her own life away. In fact, the whole proceeding lasted only half an hour and ended with her being condemned to death. She took the pronouncement of sentence with stony calm, then was led back to her cell.

To Ralph, the blow was terrific. Obviously Delka had recovered again, and the girl was under his sway—but whether intentionally or not was not clear.

That night, unsleeping, Ralph sat in his apartment thinking the problem out. The only course left to him was a desperate one, but for that very reason it might work. Elna, as a state prisoner, would be permitted the traditional death before a firing squad, instead of the lethal chamber accorded to the common criminal.

She would be led out into the small courtyard of the prison, with its high encircling walls—at five in the morning, when there would be little sky traffic and few people about.

Ralph's eyes gleamed as he sat thinking. If he were to use his fast space-flyer, hover over the courtyard, then drop a grapple hook. . . .

Elna would undoubtedly seize it and be whirled up to safety. If it failed—well, she was doomed anyway, and by this expedient she *might* have a fighting chance. But he must know exactly what he was doing—the layout, everything. In other words, a reconnaissance was necessary.

Twenty minutes over the prison yard, using infra-red photographic plates, and the thing was done. . . .

The following day he spent in a study of the photographs he had developed—then, after a sleep and careful preparation, he was ready for action by four o'clock in the early morning of the day after.

Four-thirty found him above the prison yard at an immense height, using the clouds for cover and a Z-ray detector beam to observe what was going on below. Piercing the pall beneath, the ray gave him a perfect dawn-light view of everything. He waited in tense expectancy.

THEN there were figures in that empty courtyard, coming into view in steady

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file. Immediately he dived down from the clouds, but just as he did so the withering blast of a heat ray smote across his rear port. It cracked but did not break it. From somewhere above, he was being attacked!

He went into an evading turn, and the movement brought him within sight of his assailant. A black space machine, heavily armored, and stained from explorations on many planets, was hurtling down from the heights of the dawn sky with the speed of a bullet. It carried no insignia, no anything—a pirate ship.

Ralph stared fixedly. It was clear now that the attack on him was not being pressed home—that blast had simply been intended to clear him out of the way.

Breathlessly he watched the unknown make a superb power dive towards the courtyard. Without a hitch, a coiling antenna wire dropped. It was Ralph's own plan, but executed by an expert—with one difference.

The antenna was better than a hawser in that its coiling end wound round the girl's body and lifted her right out of the square. Rapidly the antenna withdrew into a floor trap, and the girl vanished with it. Then the ship was streaking into the distance with demoniacal speed.

Ralph hesitated briefly, bewildered by the speed with which everything had happened. Then he glanced at his fuel gauge. That decided him. In a series of wide circles, he returned to the ground, coming to rest in the prison's flying park.

As he clambered outside, he saw the powerful figure of Walsh, the prison governor, hurrying towards him. Ralph waited, grimly prepared for the storm. Of course they were bound to accuse him because of the rescue attempt the unknown had forestalled. It was therefore a big surprise to him when Walsh held out his hand in greeting.

"Nice work, anticipating Delka like that! The only pity is that he was too fast for you!"

"*Delka!*" Ralph ejaculated, startled.

"Why surely! You knew, didn't you?" The governor looked a trifle surprised. Then he gave a taut smile. "But you *must* have! We all got the news that Delka's machine was heading towards Earth on an unknown mission."

"Yes—of course," Ralph muttered, recalling he had been too busy recently to listen to news.

"You did well to pick up his trail, and even better to guess his intentions. Well, what are you going to do now, Dale?

"Two of the greatest space-pirates are together in the void! Obviously they have been in collusion all the time—and you are an ace Interplanetary man. To me, it all adds up."

Ralph's brain worked fast. Obviously circumstances had played right into his hands.

"I'm going after them," he announced. "Get your men to fuel me up, will you?"

The governor shouted his orders, then turned back to find Ralph looking at him anxiously.

"Governor, would you do me a favor?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"Well, it's rather hard to explain. You know that Elna was—and still is—my fiancée, that I believe in her real innocence?"

The governor nodded slowly.

"I know, but you cannot expect me to do anything which might alter the sentence against her. I am simply here to see that the law is enacted, no matter what."

"I don't expect that, sir. I simply want to play a hunch which may prove her innocence—but I'll need your help. All I wish is for you to ask the Radio Police to stand by with open receivers. And I want you to do the same, because your word on what you hear will be absolute proof.

"I am going to leave my own wrist radio transmitter open from the moment I take off from here. Whatever messages you get over it must be recorded in full. At the same time you might contact Judge Morgan, who tried Elna's case, and Mr. Grimshaw, the brain specialist. Have them listen as well. Think you can do that for me?"

"I can do it," the governor assented, "but it will have to be extremely convincing to make the law rescind its verdict."

"I know that!" Ralph clenched his fist. "But it's just a chance, and I'm going to take it! Thanks again, sir."

HE TURNED away and hurried across to where the ground crew had just finished refueling his machine. Soon he was in the air—and then the void. . . .

Slipping his telescopic sights into position, he peered through them earnestly. Here, in this colossal expanse, it was possible to see for vast distances, so vast indeed that Delka's flying start went for nothing. His ship was still visible, the remotest silver atom catching the sunlight against the backdrop of the fixed stars.

Ralph set his course immediately, eased in the speed control notch by notch. With ever mounting velocity, he went streaking through space at a rate which held his lungs in steel bands.

It seemed that Delka had spotted the pursuit, for his ship suddenly put on speed—but as fast as it was, it could not outdistance Ralph's hurtling police flyer.

At last firing range was reached, as Ralph soon found out by the blast of a ray gun directed towards him. He didn't hesitate to retaliate with his own disintegrators. Irregularities of chipped metal appeared in the hull of Delka's vessel.

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Ralph snapped on his transmitter.

"Open up, Delka, or I'll blast your ship right out of the universe!"

"It's as well to do as he says," came the voice of Elna through the speaker. Then she spoke directly into the microphone.

"All right, Ralph, come aboard. I'll guarantee your safety."

Ralph's heart gave a leap. It was the normal Elna speaking. That made things a lot easier. He turned and scrambled into his spacesuit, anchored the two ships alongside each other, then entered the renegade's vessel by the emergency airlock. Slowly, prepared for any trickery, he walked into the control room.

The girl was there, quite unharmed, standing by the control board—but she was pale and obviously strained from her experiences. On the other side of the board stood the immense Martian, Delka, ugly as sin, his coarse oddly flat face traced with a deep scar. His big purple eyes regarded Ralph suspiciously. Then at last he spoke.

"You may think yourself lucky that I haven't killed you, my friend! I have only refrained because this Earth girl ordered it. To a certain extent I am compelled to obey her wishes. She and I are mentally interlinked."

"I know," Ralph said grimly.

"That saves a lot of explanation for me, then. The moment I heard over the space radio that she was to be executed, I came to save her. I had to do it, because her death would have meant my death too—and vice versa."

Ralph glanced idly at the minute transmitter on his wrist.

"I don't understand what you mean by that, Delka," he said. "Explain in detail."

"We are mental twins. That much you say you know. You may also know that the Martians—particularly the males—have a far stronger mentality than any Earthling because of a more advanced evolution. That is why this girl is dominated by *my* mind at times instead of mine ever being dominated by hers.

"It is her normal will which makes the domination spasmodic rather than constant. But even as the parting of Siamese twins is likely to bring death, so would the death of either of us bring death to the other through the immense mental shock involved.

"I learned from records of the happening in my infant days which brought this about. There is only one way out. We must remain together until death!"

"Anything but that!" the girl said huskily. "I'd sooner be dead right now!"

"I value my life even if you do not value yours!" Delka retorted. "Just because my being an outlaw has forced you into being one is no reason why I should die because you don't care to live!"

Ralph's eyes gleamed with the light of relief. Those words, acquittal in themselves, had been heard back on Earth by the men who mattered, if the prison governor had managed to arrange it.

"There is one thing I know," Ralph stated quietly. "I was sent to take the pair of you into custody, and I'm going to do it!"

"Not if I know it!" Delka snapped. Reaching behind him, he whipped up a heavy iron bar from the control board bench. His intention was obviously to throw it—but Elna dived for him suddenly. The bar missed its direction and crashed heavily on her head. Without a sound she crumpled, motionless, to the floor.

Ralph leapt, overwhelmed with fury—but a terrific uppercut knocked him flying. By the time he had got to his feet again Delka's ray gun was leveled at him.

"Lucky this girl's thoughts only affect me if she dies," Delka breathed. "Otherwise I'd be unconscious now. Don't move unless you want to die before—"

SUDDENLY there was a clanging from somewhere above. Astounded, Delka glanced up. Ralph too was so surprised that he forgot to seize his advantage and looked at the emergency hatch instead. It opened suddenly, and the helmeted head of the prison governor appeared, a ray gun in his leveled gloved hand.

"You!" Delka exploded, tightening his hold on his own weapon.

"Don't shoot!" Ralph yelled as he saw the governor's hand move—but he was too late.

A shaft of flame bit straight to Delka's heart. He winced, gave a sobbing sigh, then crashed his length on the floor.

Ralph could only stare dumbly as the governor came down into the control room. Behind him were others—Judge Morgan, Dr. Grimshaw and several high police officials.

"I decided to get them together and follow you," the governor explained when he had taken off his helmet. "We figured from what we had heard over the radio that it was too big a job for you to tackle alone. We heard everything. You need have no fear but that Elna Haydon is as good as acquitted right now."

"*Acquitted!*" Ralph gave a hollow laugh as the brain specialist lifted the girl to the wall bed. "*Acquitted!* I told you not to shoot! The shot that killed Delka killed her too! You must have heard what he said about interlocked minds."

"I—forgot that," the governor hesitated.

"But she still lives!" Grimshaw cried, swinging round. "There must be a reason—

(*Concluded on page 87*)

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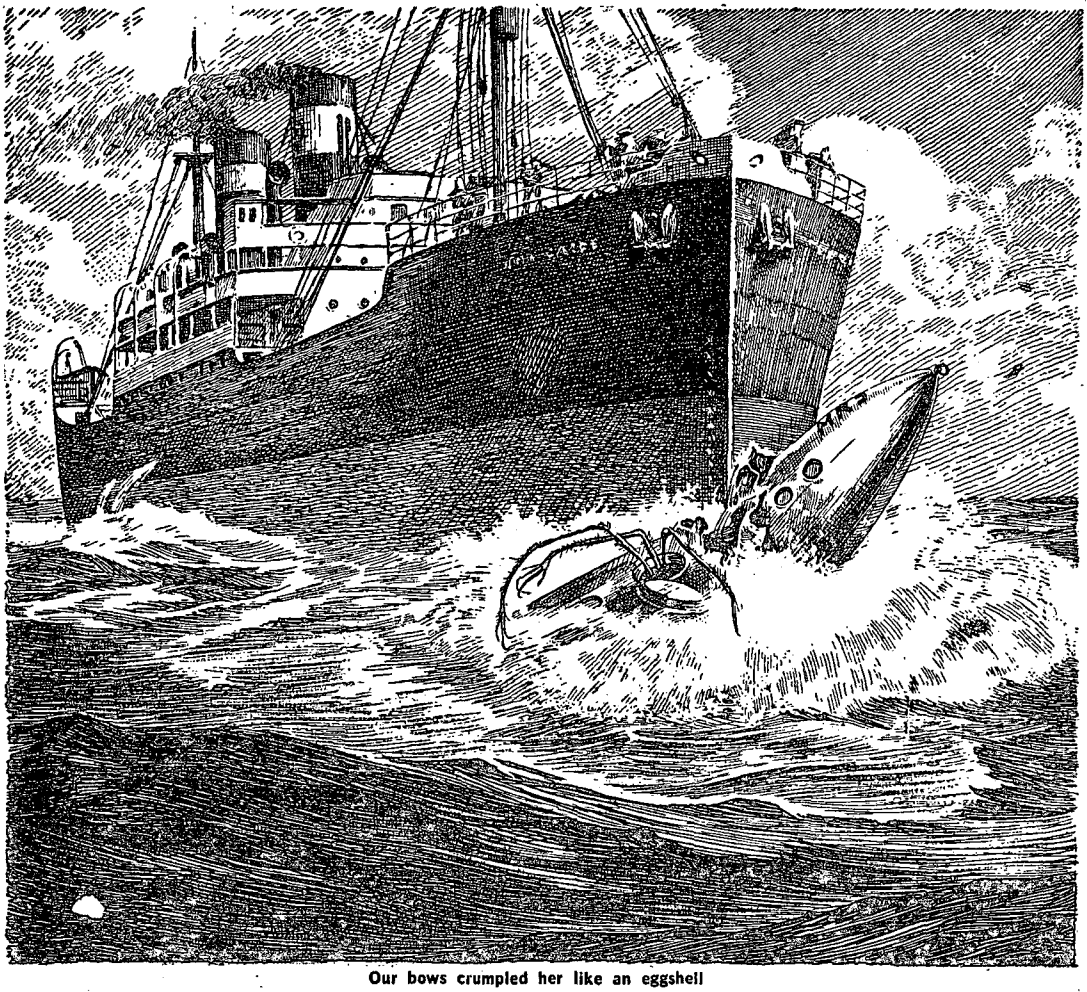

Our bows crumpled her like an eggshell

ONE CAME BACK

By GEORGE WHITLEY

The freighter's crew was ready to rescue the survivors of the first two-way rocket trip to the moon, until—

I WAS one of those distressing meals.

Personally, I can sympathize with the Old Man. We all have our pet aversions (mine is snakes, real ones) and to find such an object in one's food makes one inclined to take the ship apart with one's bare hands.

In the Old Man's case it was insects.

And he found a cockroach in his soup.

The Mate didn't improve matters. He suggested that it would have been worse, much worse, if he'd found only half a cockroach.

I thought that Pop was going to be literally, physically sick. A greenish pallor overspread his usually ruddy features, and he gulped once or twice.

But he regained control.

"Tell the Chief Steward I want him. At once!" he barked at Watson, who was waiting at table.

Just then the *News* came on.

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The speaker on the after-bulkhead had been ladling out music, dreamy, Viennese waltzes that had formed merely a pleasant background to the conversation. But when the smooth voice of the announcer informed us that the *News* would follow in just under half a minute, Watson turned up the volume control and all of us fell silent. Strange, how these wartime customs still persist. . . .

This time, however, the *News* was such as to make it well worth our while to belay the chatter and listen—just like old times, when we were thrilled to hear of the collapse of Italy, the invasion of the strongholds of the Axis, the flight of the Austrian paper hanger, the fall of Berlin.

The set was tuned to the B.B.C., in some ways rather a pity. The Americans would have made this news item sound as thrilling as it actually was. Even so, one could sense the intense undercurrent of excitement just beneath the announcer's calm, too calm, voice.

"It has just been revealed," he said, "by Doctor William Hendry, the Astronomer Royal, that a small object has been detected which is, undoubtedly, *en route* from the Moon to Earth. Dr. Hendry refused to make a definite statement, but admitted it seems probable that the object is one of the seventeen manned rockets that have made the trip from the Earth to the Moon only to vanish into the unknown.

"It is, of course, too early to hazard an opinion as to whether it is one of the British ships or one of those launched by the Americans and Russians, but the astronauts, whatever their nationality, can be assured of a welcome such as no son of this planet has ever before received.

"When interviewed, Dr. Hendry gave it as his opinion that the ship will fall in the Pacific Ocean. All vessels in this area will be warned to keep a good lookout for the explorers. The Admiralty announces that British and American naval units and aircraft are standing by to institute a thorough search should the rocket fall far from shipping lanes.

"Listeners will recall. . . ."

But the rest of the news was drowned by an excited babble of conversation from the officers' table.

"So they've done it at last!" said the Old Man. "Who'd have thought, in the days of the war when we were all playing around with all kinds of rocket weapons, that it would lead to this in so short a time?

"Think of it, gentlemen, the first men back from the Moon.

"The reception they get will make Lindbergh's look like the Vicar's tea party."

"Oh, do you think that it'll be us that picks them up, sir?" excitedly squeaked little Chadwick, the junior cadet. "Just think of it, we'll see them and talk to them and hear their stories. We might even get *our* pictures in the papers, too!"

"Wonder what the chances of salvage will be?" growled MacMaster, the Chief Engineer. "Those Moon Rockets must cost a tidy penny."

"Perhaps we shall find out what happened to all the other rockets," suggested Wayne. "I still think they came up against something hostile."

"Rubbish, Sparks!" Thornton, the Third Mate, put in rudely.

HE WAS one of those young men who knew everything.

"The Moon has no atmosphere, no water, no life. They just made a mess of the landing, that's all. Now, this fellow who's coming back now will probably have too much sense to try to come down on his main drive through an atmosphere.

"He'll almost certainly have no fuel left, anyhow. He'll use the braking ellipse technique. A pity, as that means that we shan't see him if he comes in at night. The first we'll know is when we find his parachute draped around the mainmast."

Captain Sinclair listened to the argument with an amused smile on his broad, fleshy face. He might have been some god, at ease and secure on the summit of Mount Olympus, listening with condescension and amusement to the bickerings of the mortals below. At last he deigned to take part in the conversation once more.

"I hope you realize, gentlemen," he said heavily, "that Dr. Handry only *thinks* that this supposititous Moon Rocket is coming down in the Pacific. Furthermore, I would point out that even if it does, this same Pacific is a very large stretch of water.

"This ship is very small by comparison, and a manned rocket will be even smaller. For us to expect to see the landing, let alone salvage the ship, is like one black beetle hoping to find another black beetle in a coal mine at midnight."

The unfortunate metaphor brought us back to where we came in.

"Watson!" he roared, "tell the Chief Steward that I want to see him at once!"

I looked at the clock. My lunch half hour was over, well over. The Fourth Mate, who was doing the meal relief, would think that I had died, or something. Time that I was getting on top.

I excused myself from the table and rushed up to the bridge.

"Sorry I'm late, Four-O," I gasped, "but I've been listening to the news. They've done it!"

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"Done what?" growled Lath. "Made a decent drop of pea soup for a change?"

"No, you mug. The first rocket's on its way back from the Moon, and they reckon that it will fall in the Pacific. Think of it, man, we might even see it!"

"So what? I want my lunch. She's going as you left her."

I don't know why, but all of us were convinced that we were going to see that blasted rocket. Probably the crews of every ship in the Pacific were equally convinced that *they* were going to be the lucky ones.

But never since the war had we seen such keenness among the men on lookout duty. And Sparks spent all his waking hours at the D.F. on the off chance that the Moon Rocket would land with its radio intact and send signals to guide surface craft to its relief.

But the day wore on without any signs or wonders in the heavens and without anything further over the radio than an official message to all ships in all areas to keep a good lookout for the first two-way space ship.

That "all areas" damped our ardour somewhat—but not for long. The Astronomer Royal had announced that the rocket would fall in the Pacific, and fall in the Pacific she would. Every time the Third Mate started getting all technical and talking about braking ellipses he was shouted down.

But nothing happened during the daylight hours.

After dinner, the conversation got back on the one, all-important topic, but I had the Middle Watch to keep. I excused myself, retired to my virtuous couch and lay for a while trying to read and listening to the buzz of voices from the saloon.

Then I tried to sleep. I suppose that I must have dozed off, for when the stand-by man of the Eight-to-Twelve Watch switched on my light, hammered on my door and shouted *"One Bell!"* I was at the controls of a rocket ship trying to make a descent into a sea of cool, foaming beer. She just refused to come down.

Without much enthusiasm, I climbed the lee ladders to Mount Misery. In the chartroom, I clutched eagerly at the cup of strong, black tea proffered me by young Chadwick, gulped it down to take the dark brown taste from my mouth. Feeling more or less human, I turned to the Night Orders.

"Cyro Course two seven three," I read. "The Radar is switched on, call me at once if it gives indication of *anything* on the surface. Keep a sharp lookout in the sky, and let me know if anything is observed falling from any part of the heavens—J. Sinclair, Master."

I went outside.

"Any sign of 'em, Peter?"

"Any sign of what?" demanded Thornton, rudely. "Pink elephants? I've never seen anything like this in all my sea experience. The whole ship is crazy."

"You've only been to sea a dog watch." I reminded him. Then—"What's that?"

"A shooting . . ." began Thornton and shut up.

IT WASN'T a shooting star. Shooting stars don't drift down with deliberate slowness. Shooting stars don't emit a continuous, whistling roar, audible for miles.

"Call the Old Man!" I yelled. *"This is it!"*

In a couple of jumps I was on Monkey Island and, with the standard repeater, grabbed a bearing of the distant, fiery monster just before it dipped below the western horizon. "Bring her round to three-o-five," I shouted down the speaking tube.

When I got down, the Old Man was on the bridge.

"Did you get a bearing on it, Mr. Dale?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Three-o-five. And I took the liberty of bringing her round to that course."

"Good. But you're quite sure?"

"Yes. I saw a rocket coming down that way once during the war. It wasn't supposed to, of course, but it made quite an impression on me. It was one of those beastly—"

"Never mind that now. Slip inside and see where this course takes us. I don't want to pile her up."

"Very good, sir."

I was out again in a couple of minutes.

"Good. I suppose you have no idea as to how far distant it was when it landed?"

"No, sir, but its rockets were still flaring when it dipped."

"A pity. Mr. Thornton, you can make out a message. Give our position and the bearing of the Moon Rocket when it fell. Get Sparks to send it at once, if any other ship saw it come down and got a bearing, it will give a fix. You'd better ring the engineers, Mr. Dale, tell them what happened and ask them to open her out."

They didn't need to be told.

"She's been going full belt since just after midnight," said Massey, the Third Engineer. "The galley wireless has beaten you to it."

Meanwhile the Old Man was sweeping the horizon ahead of the ship with his powerful Zeiss night glasses. You know the things, big, beautiful prismatics that'll pick up a black cat in a coal mine at midnight at ten miles range.

Finally he realized the futility of his actions. But it is hard for those of us who were at sea before the war to accept the fact that the electronic eyes of Radar will save wear and tear on eyes of flesh and blood.

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"I'm not doing much good up here," he grunted, at last. "I can never get used to all the fancy gadgets we have these days. But I'll be on my settee if you want me. If you don't pick anything up, pass the word on to the next watch at four.

"Oh, and let me know if any other ship sends a bearing or distance, or if we get any instructions from the Admiralty. Goodnight."

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with the silent stars.

Yes, the stars—they didn't seem distant that night.

There was Mars, hanging low and ruddy in the west, a fixed, unwinking light beside the ruddy flame that was Aldebaran.

"You're next," I whispered. "You're next."

There to the south'ard, was the Cross, with its two bright pointers, blazing beacons to lure men out into Space. Alpha and Beta Centauri—which one was the nearest star? And how far was it? I coud never remember. But it wasn't far.

How long would it take if one could maintain a constant acceleration of, say, two gravities? But you'd want atomic power for that. And suppose one worked up to the speed of light—what then?

Merridew, my cadet, came across from the other wing of the bridge and brought me back to earth with a jolt.

"Light on the port bow, sir!" he yelled.

But it was only Canopus setting.

Eight bells came at last, and still the little alarm bell of the radar was silent, and still the little lights remained unlit.

"Give me a yell if you pick anything up, sir," I asked the Chief Officer. "I'd hate to miss seeing the thing."

"You've seen too much already," said Gregory. "You'll never live it down if it *was* a shooting star."

But I knew it wasn't. And so, I think, did he.

Surprisingly, I slept very well until the steward came in with my morning tea. Oh, I admit that when I turned in I was really excited, and the words "With daylight we're going to see the first men back from the Moon!" kept chasing themselves through my mind.

But I was tired. I hadn't slept much before midnight, and the excitement on the Middle Watch seemed to have exhausted me. Nevertheless, the first question that sprang to my mind when Watson called me was. "Have they picked it up yet?"

But I never asked it.

WATSON himself volunteered the information before I had a chance to open my mouth.

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"No sign of it yet, sir," he said. "And there's nothing through from any other ship."

"Hm," I said, reaching for my tea.

Then, just audible in the officers' flat, came a hail from the crow's nest to the bridge.

"What was that?"

"I didn't catch it, sir," replied Watson, and was out of my room like a shot from a gun.

He didn't return.

"This is it!" I told myself and was out of my bunk with an alacrity unprecedented even in the days of World War II. We were in the tropics, and it was the work of seconds to shed pyjamas and jump into shorts and shirt.

When I arrived on the bridge, I found everybody staring ahead through their glasses. Unfortunately, I hadn't brought mine up with me. So I grabbed the ship's telescope.

On the lower bridge and boatdeck, one deck below, were the Bos'n and most of the deck crowd, ostensibly there to clear away the accident boat. They too were staring ahead. Everybody except the engine room watch on duty must have been on deck.

At first, I had a little trouble picking it up.

Once I had it in the telescope's field of view, and the telescope properly focussed, however, it was impossible to lose.

It was, I remember, a clear, cloudless morning. Sky and sea were both a flawless blue. There was no wind, but there was a long, low swell, the aftermath of some storm that must have passed well to the south'ard.

And there, right ahead, bobbing up and down on the low, watery hills, was a little, conical object.

Sometimes black against the blue it was, sometimes silver as it caught the light. It looked for all the world like an aluminum-painted starboard handbuoy that had broken adrift from its moorings and drifted far out into the Pacific.

Its very shape, at first, caused us to doubt.

We had expected, somehow, to find a long, streamlined hull, with great vanes and driving tubes aft, floating, almost like a balloon, on the sea surface. Then we realized that, like an iceberg, the Moon Rocket was showing us only a tiny portion of its volume—its nose.

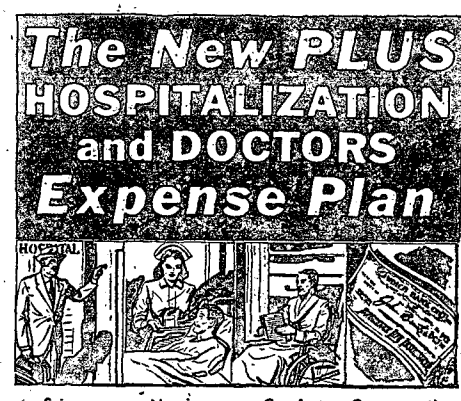
The minutes dragged by, and the distant silvery shape grew more and more distinct.

Sparks came out of the Wireless Room.

"I've got the message off, sir," he told the Old Man. "And I've tried to raise the Moon Rocket on every frequency known to radio technology, and a few that aren't. But there's no answer."

"Their set probably got smashed up with

[Turn page]



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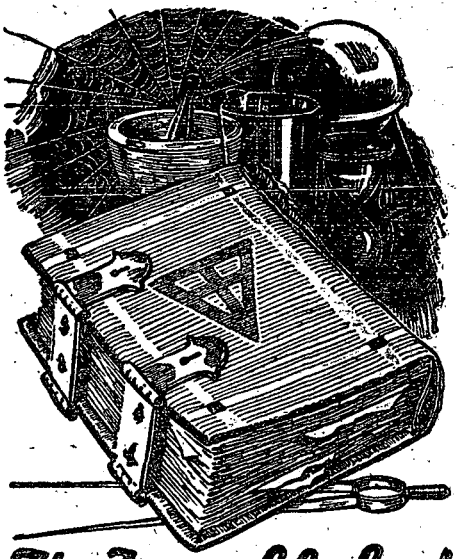

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the initial takeoff," put in Thornton. "The escape velocity from Earth is seven miles per second, which implies . . ."

Captain Sinclair froze him with a glance.

"Nobody aboard *this* vessel," he said, heavily, "is concerned with escape velocities or their implications. Our job, as seamen, is merely to rescue fellow humans cast adrift miles from the nearest land. Mr. Wayne!"

"Sir?"

"You needn't go back to the radio office."

"Thank you, sir."

Sparks took his place among those lining the bridge rail.

Now we were close to the rocket.

Even at this short range, she still suggested a buoy. A ringbolt recessed into the very tip of the nose, heightened the illusion. It seemed that her builders had foreseen that she might have to be taken in tow.

There were ports, too, but these all appeared to have been tightly shuttered from the inside. Thornton, almost recovered from his snub, ventured to suggest that these had probably been secured in place against the landing and that the crew had not yet sufficiently recovered to remove them. This blinding glimpse of the obvious passed unrebuked.

"Put her on Stand-by, Mr. Thornton," said Captain Sinclair. Then, a little later, "Stop Both."

THE tinkle of the telegraph as the engineer replied broke what had become an oppressive silence.

Losing way all the time, we glided quietly up to the first spaceship to return to Mother Earth.

Everyone could read the big black letters, half submerged by the calm clear water, painted boldly on the silver hull.

M R 5—Moon Rocket No. 5

On the bridge, we could hear the murmur running around the decks.

"M R, she's one of ours! Yes, old England was the first to do it. Wonder if they've brought any of the Yanks or Russians back with 'em."

As though we were rounding a fairway buoy we circled the rocket. There were no signs of life. Another circuit, and yet another. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I was beginning to have morbid visions of a metal coffin full of half-cremated corpses.

And then we lost steerage way.

Rising and falling gently as the long, low hills of water swept up from the southern horizon, the ship of Space and the ship of the sea lay in fantastic, anachronistic juxtaposition.

To a casual observer, we should have looked merely like a vessel coming up to a large silver-painted mooring-buoy, espe-

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cially since some vagary of wind or current had swung us so that our bows were pointed directly at the rocket.

I don't know whose idea it was to blow the whistle.

Somebody pushed over the lever actuating the electric control, and a long mournful blast shattered the stillness.

"Who did that?" barked the Old Man. Then, "It might be a good idea. Give 'em another one."

"Shall I take the accident boat away, sir?" asked Gregory. "We could tap on the hull."

The Old Man took two slow paces away from the Chief Officer, his face heavy with thought. For a long moment he stood, head bowed, chin in hand, then turned.

"No," he said. "No. Not yet."

"But, sir . . ."

"I said no."

"It's opening!" shouted Merridew.

Once more the rocket irresistably compelled every eye.

A round door, a few feet above the thing's waterline, was swinging out with agonizing slowness. Below us, on the boatdeck, one of the deckboys started to whimper. The Bos'n cuffed his head, growled in a carrying whisper that if he didn't shut up he'd soon have something to snivel about.

The circular valve swung back till it was almost flush with the hull.

[*Turn page*]

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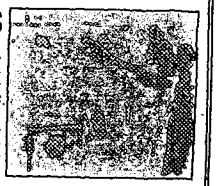

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Still we saw nothing. It was very dark inside the rocket, and the sun was behind it.

Peering intently through the telescope I thought I saw a glint of metal, but I wouldn't swear to it. What I will swear to is the unmistakable, uneasy feeling that we were being watched.

Yes, there was somebody there.

Somebody, or . . .

What was that?

It seemed that something like a long, thin whip flicked briefly across the pitch-black aperture, then vanished.

The lens of the telescope seemed to have grown misty. I withdrew the instrument from my eye, pulled out my pocket handkerchief preparatory to wiping it.

I saw Captain Sinclair let his expensive prismatic night glasses fall, unheeded, to smash on Number-2 hatch many feet below. His hands seized the telegraph handles, and from *Stop* those handles swung to *full ahead* with a double ring.

"Stop!" I cried, wildly. "*Stop* him!"

I yelled to the Quartermaster to port the wheel, but he, we afterwards discovered, had deserted his post and had his nose glued to the forward wheelhouse windows.

In that unseemly, undignified struggle around the engine room telegraph I didn't see the rocket go down. None of us on the bridge did. But they say that our bows crumpled her like an eggshell, and that only a large, oily bubble that came up right in our wake marked the spot where she had been.

When Captain Sinclair felt the shock of impact he let his deathlike grip on the telegraph handles relax. He faced our stern accusing faces with horror writ large on his. Not the horror with which a man realizes that he has thrown away his Certificate, his rank, his very means of livelihood.

No. Something much deeper, more dreadful.

"The blasted things were hairy," he said at last. "And they had feelers. And too many legs."

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INTERLINK

(Concluded from page 78)

quickly—I've got to operate on her brain. It's badly injured. Give me a hand, all of you."

Ralph was the only one who did not. He could only watch demusedly as the ship's emergency kit was brought into use, as the surgeon's hands worked steadily under the roughly erected floodlight. It seemed hours before he was through—then the girl was lying, her head bandaged, on the bed. She was motionless, but breathing steadily.

Ralph crept forward and caught Grimshaw's shoulder.

"Doc, will she—?"

"A million-to-one chance," the surgeon breathed, mopping his face. "Her link with Delka was through the subconscious area. Evidently her father made a mistake, being an amateur, in using that region.

"The blow that knocked her unconscious injured that region of her brain, and it also rendered her numb to the shock when Delka was killed. It was a kind of mental anesthetic. She will recover and be a normal woman again, except for two things. Her memory will be very bad and she will never dream. Otherwise—"

"Thank God!" Ralph whispered. Then a sudden thought struck him. "But, Doc, why didn't Delka collapse when she did?"

"He had the stronger mind, and Elna did not die from the blow—therefore he was not affected. . . ."

Ralph nodded slowly and went over to the girl's silent figure. Thankfully, gently, he caught hold of her limp hand, held it imprisoned in his own until at last her eyes opened.

She did not speak. Neither did he. But in that moment they both knew that the kinship with a dead renegade Martian had gone forever.

CAPTAIN FUTURE

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By EDMOND HAMILTON

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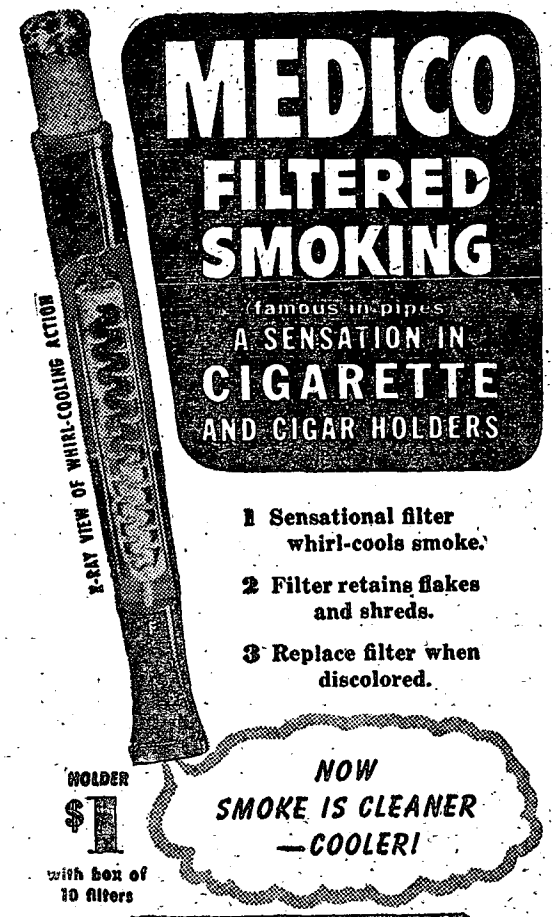

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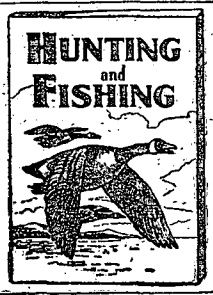

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

a strong beak. What are readers going to say to this revelation. Cheerio—*509 Selwood Avenue, Hastings, New Zealand.*

Well, Jack—Kiwi Jack—it looks as if you have plenty of nothing where back issues of SS and TWS are concerned. As for the Kiwi business, it has never been a secret. Most of the would-be rocket ship pilots who write into this column can't fly, and they like to stick their long noses into everything. Answered?

SUPPORT FOR THE STAGGERING SARGE

By Ralph Glisson

Dear Sergeant Saturn: I am in complete agreement with your statements in the spring issue of TWS concerning Howard Phillips Lovecraft. I've read several of his stories (?) and have concluded from those I have read that he has only one plot and what a plot.

Mysterious man finds hidden records in wall (or some other convenient place) which leads him to believe that he is a remote descendant of Rupert Sludge who practiced the black arts in witch-ridden Salem.

Searching further, he discovers some long forgotten spells and incantations which he uses to call forth from the edge of space, Blub Sluffglutch (The Unnameable). All this finally ends with the monster leaving for the stars again and the man being killed in a fire, etc. Mix in a few weird pipings and some mysterious lights and sounds and you have THE plot.

So much for Lovecraft. Now to the spring issue of TWS. I've only read 3 issues of your magazine but I enjoy it very much, the stories that is. Some of the art work is pretty putrid, although the pics in the latest issue are better than usual, especially those by Orban and Finlay.

The cover wasn't as bad as some I've seen, but it wasn't good. Your cover on the Summer *Startling Stories* is excellent, how about one like it on *Thrilling Wonder Stories* soon.

The stories were all good, "Devils From Warkonia" being best with the two novelets a close second.—*542 Prescott Road, Merion, Pennsylvania.*

Thanks, Pee-lot Glisson, thanks very much. How about a drink of Xeno on the house—I mean ship—I mean. . . Oh, comet tails! No, only one, and that for the support of ye Sarge's assault upon the oversacred fenmory of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. No, he can't have two, Froggie—not after that crack about our artwork. What does he think I'm made of anyway—Xeno?

Quiet, Wart-ears, you misbegotten son of an Arcturean slime turtle!

EGO, EGAD!

By Robert Ego

Dear Sarge: I have some back issues of science fiction mags to dispose of and you might like to mention them in your department for some of the fans interested in earlier science fiction.

These include, among others, Science Wonder Stories, June, 1929 to May, 1931, except for Feb. 1931, missing; and the four issues of Sci. Wonder Quarterly for 1929-30. Besides the Skylark stories there are some good ones by Leinster, Keller, Merritt, and others, and the mags are in pretty good shape.

Of course I was thinking of raising some cash on these issues—but if someone could keep me supplied with Xeno—hmmm.

By the way, after getting past the opening of De Profundis I found it was one of the best. It didn't sound too promising at first for some reason.—*Lisbon, N. Dak.*

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Zounds, Snaggie, another would-be raider on Xeno! Lock up the other barrels and put the anti-everything-except-the-Sarge-and-his-minions screen around them. The menace from Earth may soon be serious if (what, again?—yes, again!) M. Katerman is to be believed. We can't be too careful.

Seriously, glad you liked Leinster's DE PROFUNDIS. It's one of Ye Sarge's favorites—not that we want a pet octopussy around the house or anything. Frogeyes is enough, but enough.

DIMOUT IN DOVER
By Joe Kennedy

Dear Sarge: See here. I have been a long and steady reader of your magazine for the past forty years. I always buy it when I see it on the newsstands. Once in a while I will even go so far as to read one or two of the stories in it.

The man with the chin whiskers down at the newsstand always charges me 15c for your mag. I sometimes go without food, without shelter, without my daily ration of Guiness's Stout just so I can buy your mag.

And things have finally come to a standstill.

Every time I open up your mag I see shapely females in the pictures.

I wouldn't mind if it were bems or robots but this is too much. It is liable to corrupt my young, receptive mind. It makes it difficult for me to sleep nights.

I demand that you take action to correct this. I will even accept donations to buy me sleeping tablets.

Yes.

The Summer issue of your mag arrived today at the newsstand. I, like a fool, bought it. Perish the day when I became a slave to science-fiction.

THINGS PASS BY was an excellent story. It was interesting, well-plotted and filled with fine fantasy and superscience. The writing was very clever. One

[*Turn page*]

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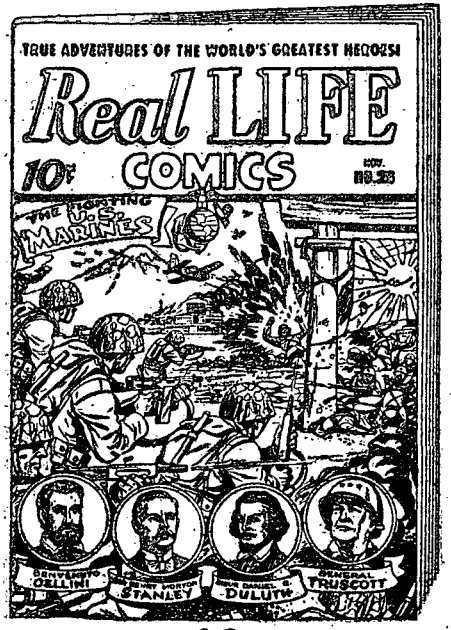

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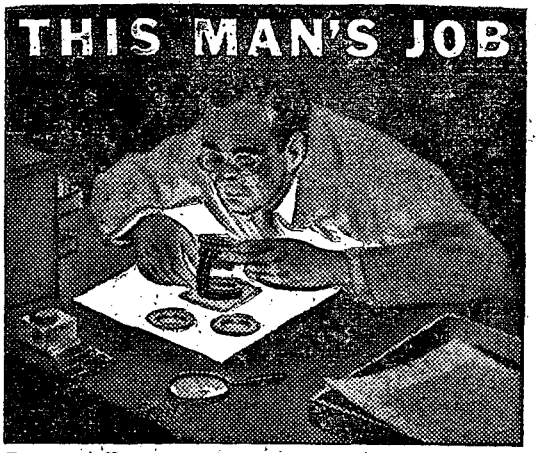

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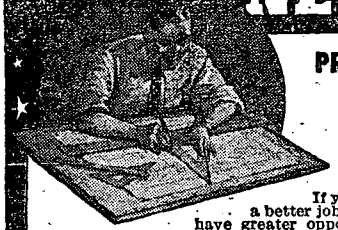

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of these days maybe I will get around to reading the thing.

What happened to the amateur story contest?

Wilbur Thomas is a very good artist.

So am I.

Dirk Wylie had the best letter in the READER SPEAKS. I agree one hundred per cent.

There is too much juvenile stuff in the READER SPEAKS. This is shocking to me, naturally.

I am amazed by the lengths some people will go just to get their names in print.

Hooray for Wylie!

Oliver had the second best letter in the RS. He is just jealous, tho, because he knows he is not so good as I am. This no doubt frustrates him.

No doubt.

If worst comes to worst, we can always have a scientific discussion in TRS. I can look up all the science in my pretty Winston Encyclopedias, and everybody will think I'm well educated.

I will not vote for Tam Pace as third best letter because he quit corresponding with me.

Fie on Pace! Throw him to the grulzaks!

The reason "grulzak" was not in the FANCYCLOPEDIA is because Speer is so ignorant.

Murial Gida, Cpl. Wells, Grimes, Frank, Montague, Murtagh, and Cosby also had good letters. Somebody ought to tell these letter-hacks, tho, that they use the pronoun "I" too much. This, I think, sounds egotistical. I am hereby telling them what I think.

I have an old copy of CAPTAIN FUTURE which I will be only too glad to trade somebody for a complete set of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES.

The drinking water around these parts has had an odd flavor ever since my aunt fell in the cistern two months ago.

The men with the grappling hooks say they'll find her yet one of these days.

It's a hard life that I lead.—*84 Baker Avenue, Dover, New Jersey.*

Take a letter, Snaggie, and *get off my lap!*

Memo to Kennedy—ummm—juvenile, he says, *juvenile!*—all right, keep it in. Wilbur Thomas *is* a very good artist. As for Kennedy—his sporadic fanzines show him to be a fine fence painter. What happened to the amateur story contest? Answer—too many amateur stories. Send us one we can run, and we'll buy it. Oh, yes—the plural of encyclopedia is encyclopediae. Maybe he should have looked *that* up. Toss Kennedy a Grulzak next time we swing close to Earth. I'm getting tired of their baying in the abandoned Xeno closet. In fact, throw them all to Kennedy. Period. . . .

Roll out another keg, Wart-ears, and start the bung. Gently now. Aaaaah!

MICHIGONE

By Al Ashley

Dear Sarge: As you seem to be Fandom's contact with *Wonder* and *Startling*, I appeal to you in hopes that you are in a position to help on occasions such as this.

On the 7th and 8th of July, the Science and Fantasy Fiction fans of the Mid-West will hold their annual Conference, perhaps better known as the Fifth Annual Michicon.

Now as you may or may not be aware, such gatherings derive most of their financial support from the ubiquitous Auction of original pictures from the Science Fiction magazines. So if you can manage to discover some of said originals laying about, can obtain possession of them, and can send them along for the occasion, you will, to say the very least, gain the gratitude of a sizeable group of fans. And who can say that such gratitude is entirely without value?

Thank you in advance for any pictures you may be able to send. We promise you one of the Conference booklets.—*25 Poplar Street, Battle Creek, Michigan.*

Okay, Froggie, send him a picture or six, but when does he think we go to press? Shame on a publisher Kiwi. What was Michicon is Michigone by this time. Sorry, Al, sorry as Al get out.

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VERMIN FOR BERMAN

By Jerry "The Kid Himself" Berman

Dear Sarge: The subject matter for this letter will cover two issues of T.W.S., seeing as there were no letters about the Spring ish in Summer.

In the Spring ish DEVILS FROM DARKONIA took first place on the one two five rating system getting ***. The rest of the issue followed in this order—

BABY FACE—**½
MARK GRAYSON UNLIMITED—**¼
NO GREATER WORLDS—**
THE PLANT MAN—**
VENUS SKY TRAP—*½
DELVERS IN DESTINY—*¼

The only decent illustrations in the whole mag were, of course Finlay's and the unnamed one for NO GREATER WORLDS. (Orban?)

In the Summer ish Leinster's great novel took first place. While it is not a classic, it is still the best story since Fall, 1943. The story rated a very good ***¾, giving it an almost classic rating. Most of the other yarns were all right, PERCY THE PIRATE and THE DECONVENTIONALIZERS tied for second place at **½.

Next issue looks good. Kuttner's novel sounds good. Let's hope that with him out of the army (he must be or else you have a large supply of his stories on hand) that he'll write some Pete Manx stories. God knows that the magazine needs it to inject some life into it.

Again about Kuttner's novel. From what I got of the plot it sounds pretty much like a serial he did for another mag. That was in collaboration with his wife, G. L. Moore. He is still the best author in STL now, in my estimation.

The Reader Squeaks (pardon Speaks) was good this time, and will be even better next time with the addition of my letter. Really the best letter was by Charles Cosby, who made some thought provoking suggestions. Why don't you run a sort of questionnaire—in one of the issues and really see what the reader wants?

[*Turn page*]

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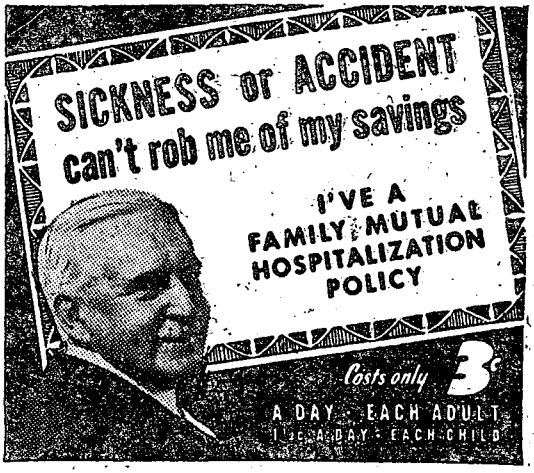
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One more thing, about Sergeant Wylie. I heartily agree with him about the inane talk presented in the Reader Speaks. When I started reading STF in '43 the future jive-talk used in this department was funny and sounded good. Now, I just scan through Saturn's mutterings to see if there is anything of interest in them.

I can sympathize with the fourteen-year-older's point of view as I am that myself. But when it runs to the chatter that the Sergeant gives out, that is tempting murder.

For the third time I will conclude, and in doing so I want to give my sympathies to Wilbur Thomas, who is getting his thunder stolen by Donnell. If any of the readers of this mag have old issues of SF magazines to trade or sell, I would appreciate it if they would write sending a list of the magazines they have. This is getting into rather a bulky thing, so I will sign off here.—*1016 Logan Avenue North, Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

If you do have any mags, Kiwis, don't send them to Pee-lot Berman—not after what he says about us. Can we help it if the subtle nuances of our sophisticated galactic humor escape his fourteen-year old brain (?). Oh, all right, we'll back down. If he has sense enough to appreciate Kuttner the Great, the Mighty, the Magnifique—perhaps, there is hope after all.

GRIPE FROM GRIMES

By Millard Grimes

Dear Sarge: After seeing the beautiful painting on the summer *Startling Stories* I had hopes that TWS

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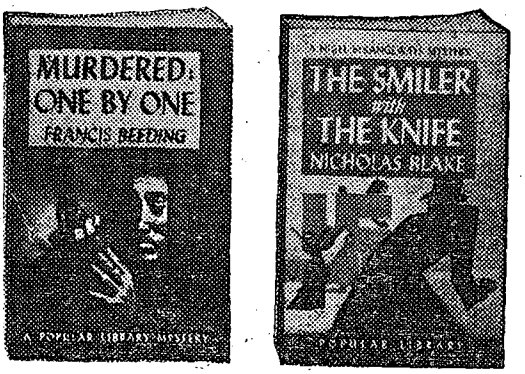

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would have a similar frontispiece. But not good old TWS. Noo, unshakable in your ignorance, that's TWS!

A drooling little man came up to me and muttered that he was looking for a pinup mag. I handed him TWS and he drooled some more. "They also publish fiction," I informed him. "As a side line, of course," I explained. Don't get me wrong. From an artistical point of view the cover is good, even better than usual. It's the subject that I'm against.

On to more pleasant matters—or are there more pleasant matters. Nope, I'm afraid this letter is nearly all gripes. But after all, the good things don't need to be discussed, it's the bad things that have to be talked about so that they will be good too. Then everything will be good and there won't be any need for a letter section, and then we'd start griping because you didn't have a letter section and—oh well.

I'm not sad because you had to cut out a few pages of your mag because I know the paper is going to a good cause. However, it sure would be nice if TWS could have trimmed edges, at least on the sides.

Some mixup over Donnel and Thomas. That ought to teach you to make the artists sign their pics. By the way, the letter section was slightly longer this time. That's good. Make it even longer. Cosby's missive was interesting.

A few bouquets. Swell yarns. Kuttner is being given to us in great quantity and that's sure okay. And Hamilton—very good. Other stories were good too. Nice pic on page 13 but it sho is dark. Very amusing letter titles.—*2307 10th St., Columbus, Ga.*

Not such a terrific gripe at that, Kiwi Grimes. As for Bergey, he and the art department have a will of their own. Besides, *we* like his covers. Even Wart-ears can seem a little dull—duller even than your drooling little man—after a couple of thousand years cooped up in space with him. And Frogeyes has a tic half the time, if not a tick (he's always picking them up somewhere) while Snaggie, and this is strictly confidential, *smells!* Xenos and pinups are ye Sarge's only hope.

Trimmed edges! Sissy stuff! Besides, if we changed the magazine too much it might lose its character and you might not want to read it—and then what would happen to this old space reeler and his three pets and his Xeno and his nice battered old rocket ship? Stop, you're making me cry! Froggie, the Xeno, the music, the three-dimensional pinup! This can't go on!

PANDORA'S ANSWERS
By Mark Mersereau

Dear Sarge: As a *bad* typist, I have never written in to your magazine, and I probably never will again, but I noticed the letter in your Summer Issue by Mr. Cosby, who included his ballot in it. He was right about Americans wanting to do things the easy way, so I'll just answer his questions.

[*Turn page*]

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1. If possible, I would want two novels per issue, instead of one.
2. I think that three full-page pictures a novel would be more than satisfactory if the pages could be spared.
3. As to my opinion about how many pages a novel should have, I believe that that is entirely up to the author and the editor, so I won't put my two cents in the scrap.
4. Novelettes, I think, should depend on the quality of them in comparison with any short stories they may take the place of.
5. With no novelettes, three shorts would be fine.
6. If articles mean fact, as opposed to fiction, none is the number I want.
7. Departments—only one—Story Behind The Story, as usual.
8. To me whether TWS has trimmed edges or not doesn't make a mite of difference.
9. Would I like an ann. . . . "#$%&'()*¼@¾½¢/, you bet I would!
10. Four stories in the annual.
11. I think that twenty-five cents is a fair price.
12. I would like a companion mag of fantasy, if the stories are not just left-overs from TWS.
13. Four times a year is O.K.
14. I'd buy TWS even if it were printed monthly.
15. I enjoy series stories, as all that I have ever read have been good.
16. If a story is good enough to stretch out into more than one magazine, definitely make it a serial.
17. I see no sense in naming my favorite authors and artists, since their work varies. *None* can be good *all* of the time, nor can the *worst* be *bad* all of the time. (With due respect to Abe Lincoln.)
18. The story that started me reading TWS was the one Mr. Cosby mentioned, in which Captain Future goes to Deneb, and for me goes double the last paragraph of his letter.

Incidentally, could you ask in THE READER SPEAKS, if anyone has the mag? I didn't start collecting them until later. Well even if you don't I still thank you for bothering to read this trash.—*9405 Burlington Boulevard, Congress Park, Illinois.*

All right, *does* anyone have it? So long now, I'm breathless as well as Xenoless. See you next swing around the System!

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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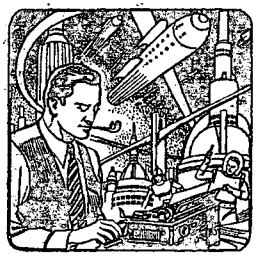

are, like most skeletons, things of grim and foreboding aspect. To Henry Kuttner, they represent a very probable vision of what the future may hold for all of us.

If the Sarge seems a trifle serious in this department, it is because the tone of the letter Hank has written is thoughtful and definitely adult. So, casting away the Xeno and other childish things briefly—yes, you scram too, Wart-ears—your old space wobbler asks you to read it in the same vein.

I'm probably one of the few fellows who doesn't have a post-war plan for Germany. I've known Nazi prisoners, and found some of them outwardly seemed to be nice chaps, the more dangerous because of that.

There was a sergeant I met—master sergeant, I think—who had studied music in Vienna, knew Schubert's music and loved it, liked the lighter parts of the Wagner Ring cycle—there are some—and might have fitted very well into an old Ramon Novarro film about old Heidelberg. Except for one thing, he was intelligent and likable.

He knew—I won't say believed, because he *knew*—that Adolf Hitler was Germany's saviour, and absolutely justified in everything he did.

[*Turn page*]

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It was a beautiful example of indoctrination. He'd grown up with the Hitler Youth Movement, and finally he'd been wounded and captured in Tunisia, when Rommel was back-tracking.

Okay. Suppose you take a kid, of any race or breed, and condition him to believe that green is pink. Or that black is white. Tell him so for years. Let him see that everybody else believes that. Set up an arbitrary system of rules and make it work—for a while.

You've got a plenty good soldier eventually.

That German sergeant will never believe that the Nazis were licked fairly. He'll probably always think that the Allies stabbed Germany in the back, the old Versailles argument. And he'll regard his people as a gallant band of heroes fighting bravely against overwhelming odds. What can you do to fight such indoctrination?

Don't ask me. If the plague were limited to Germany, it would be easier to find the answer. But there are war-mongers and demagogues in other lands too—the samurai who ruled Japan's diplomatic policy were one example.

Planned scientific education, over a long-term period, is one possible solution. But science is always boosted many years ahead during a war. The Third World War, if and when it comes, may be the ultimate blackout. And it may not solve anything at that.

There'll be people left who want war. They may not call it that. Hitler wanted "peaceful expansion"—he said. Scientists as a rule are peaceable people. A world administered by a non-political, non-racial group of scientists might be a swell place. But it won't come tomorrow or the next day.

I think there'll be a sword tomorrow—or the threat of one. We saw the failure of isolationism some years ago. You can often stop a cancer in its early stages by treating it with hard radiation, but if you wait, a scalpel is necessary. And if you wait too long, nothing helps.

The books of Dickens brought about needed reform in England, debtors' prisons, child labor and so on. There've been some rather interesting solutions proposed from time to time in stf books. A lot of such Utopian plans were pure hogwash, but some have decidedly been worth consideration.

In SWORD OF TOMORROW I propose no plan. I just wanted to show some possibilities, and how the human element might affect a future civilization. So—as far as the story goes—I hope the readers will find it interesting.

—*Henry Kuttner*

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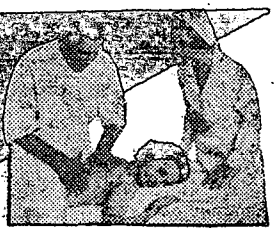

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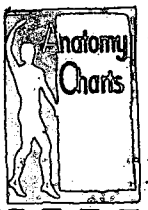

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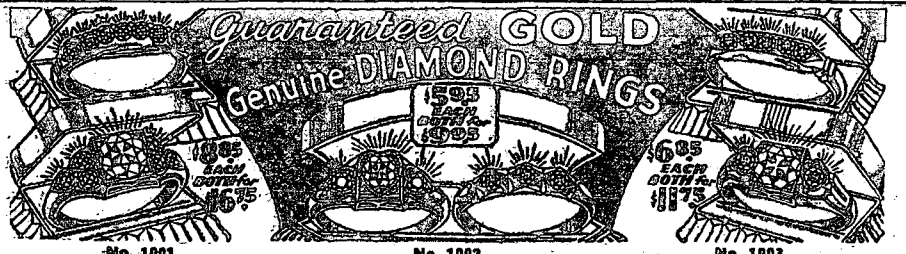

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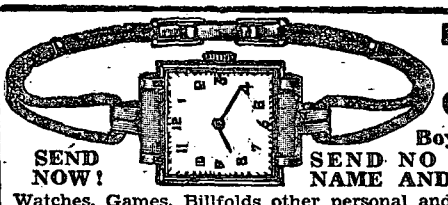

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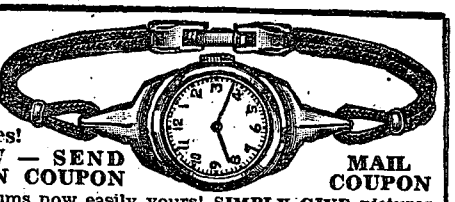

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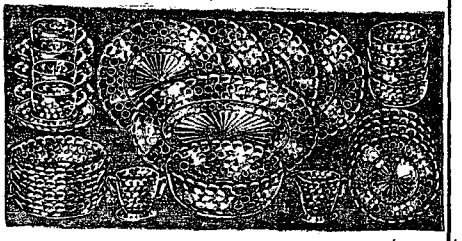

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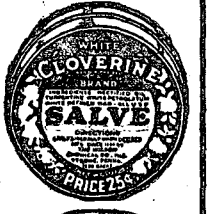

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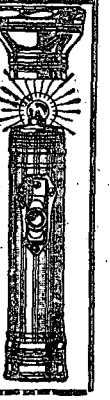

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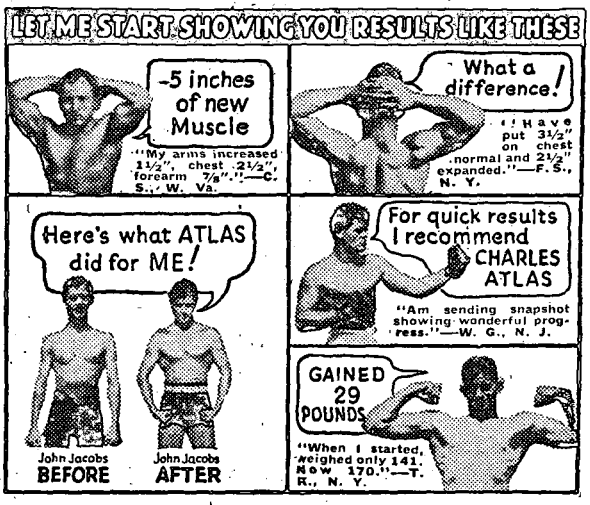
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